Sectarianising the Shi'a Subject:

Identity, Ideology, and Unconscious in the Iraqi Shi'a Diaspora

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Abstract

This thesis takes an ethnographic focus on the beliefs, rituals, and lived realties of practicing Iraqi Shi'is in London in order to theorise an alternative conception of intra-communal sectarianism. Eschewing primordialist or essentialist understanding of sectarianism as a natural product of underlying ethno-religious "sects", the thesis simultaneously seeks to distance itself from any kind of normative characterisation of sectarianism as a necessarily "bad" thing. Rather, the term "sectarianism" as defined and applied throughout this thesis should be understood as a fundamentally *descriptive* category; one that highlights processes of identity formation and mobilisation in which certain kinds of in- and out-group identity boundaries are prioritised over others.

Drawing on insights garnered from psychoanalysis, particularly the work of scholars such as Jacques Lacan, this thesis puts forward an understanding of sectarianism that sees it as the *unconscious by-product of positive identity formation*. Crucially, the theoretical framework employed here distinguishes analytically and conceptually between the *individual* and the *subject*, whereby the latter denotes the subject of discourse. Such a framework allows the thesis to enquire into the construction, function, and (re)iteration of the discursively-formed sectarianised diasporic "Shi'a subject" as a product of individual and collective practices of identification. It is this *Shi'a subject* that forms the core of the enquiry conducted here.

Ultimately, the thesis makes the case that the sectarianised diasporic Shi'a subject functions as an ideological construction that is simultaneously the product of contemporary discursive and political alignments and that channels the desires and attachments of individuals by promoting (re)iterative practices of identification. In this sense, the notion of a coherent and stable "Shi'a identity" functions as an ideological fantasy that channels the desire of individuals to identify with this subject at the same time as it unconsciously produces sectarianism as the by-product of such identity practices through its inscription in the contemporary (ideological) power structures of liberalism, equality, humanitarianism, minority rights, and consumer capitalism.

Acknowledgements

Coming to the end of this journey, it is difficult to find the words to express my gratitude to all those who helped make this thesis a reality – in so many ways, it is their project, and not mine; all I have done is transcribe their thoughts, experiences, and understandings onto paper in the guise of the written word.

Firstly, I would like to express my thanks and admiration to all those who participated in this research and who gave me such valuable insights into their daily lives. In particular, to those women and men who took me in as one of their own and who shared their thoughts with me – my only hope is that I have succeeded in doing justice to the depth of their emotions and beliefs, and to capturing the nuances of their experiences. Without these people, not only would I never have had the idea for this research in the first place, I wouldn't have had the opportunity to conduct fieldwork in such a variety of settings and circumstances – from the women's only gatherings in Um Z's living room, the 'Ashura *majalis* of London's "Shi'a triangle", to the *hawzas* and holy shrines of Iran – nor would I have developed my knowledge of Arabic, and of Iraqi dialect in particular. I would also like to thank all those who constantly challenged me and questioned my assumptions throughout the research process. Such conversations and heated debates ultimately served to make this thesis stronger, and I hope I have done justice to the variety and complexity of opinions I encountered along the way.

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Without the support and encouragement of my family and friends, I would never have succeeded in completing this project. To my mother, father, and sister, I thank you for providing the academic inspiration, intellectual example, and personal challenge that allowed me to develop and pursue my own ideas. More than anyone else, this project simply would not have existed without the unswerving belief and support of my husband, Moreas Madani. For the last five years he has played the role of unofficial manager, cheerleader, intellectual equal, existential sounding board, proofreader and, when I needed it, devil's advocate. Without his eternal support, encouragement, and guidance, this thesis would never have seen the light of day; and I dedicate it to him in due recognition of all that he has done to turn it into a reality.

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A Note on Transliteration

The transliteration of Arabic and Persian words in this thesis is based on a simplified version of the system recommended by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (IJMES). I employ IJMES's transliteration of consonants and vowels but omit all diacritics, except the mark for *ayn* which is denoted by (ʻ). Exceptions to these rules are names of individuals and places where an English version is widely accepted, including the name "Hussain" and all derivations (*hussainiyya*, *hussaniyyat*, etc.). Words transliterated from Arabic or Persian are italicised, except titles of individuals and the months of the Islamic calendar. In cases where a word has entered common parlance in English, the recommended IJMES spelling is used unless covered by one of the exceptions mentioned above.

Regarding the use of "Shi'a" and "Shi'i": although grammatically in Arabic the former denotes the collective noun and the latter the adjective, throughout this thesis I have employed the common usage of these terms in English, whereby "Shi'a" denotes both the collective and singular noun ("Shi'a diaspora", "Shi'a establishment") and "Shi'i" serves an adjectival function ("Iraqi Shi'i person"). This serves the purpose of both simplifying my use of these terms, and distinguishing between individual practicing Shi'is and the *Shi'a subject* that forms the core of the enquiry undertaken here.

For Moreas

Now, and forever

I woke up when I was just a young boy,
And saw that life's not what it seems.
I realised long ago,
It's a dream within a dream.
I remember when father once held my hand,
Told me a story about a faraway land,
Land of hope, land of mystery,
The land I never got to see.

Son, he said, "Don't ever stop fighting
For what you truly believe,
Let her set your heart and soul free,
Breath the air she has to give,
She's the one that will help you dream,
With her sun and gracious beam."
Land of my forefathers' history,
The land I never got to see.

Father, why then did you leave her,
The land of your birth?
Why did they all mistreat her?
With poison distort her earth?
I often wish you were present to see,
How they betray her whilst her sons flee,
Land of sorrow, land of misery,
The land I never got to see.

She cries, "son can you help me?
Your father, he abandoned me."
I weep, I'm just lost here,
I don't know where I'm meant to be.
They say: "Boy, don't loose your identity,
Remember who and what you're supposed to be,
Part of a distorted community
Of the land I never got to see.

She was once the endless beauty of time
Now… she's a dying rose
Lost her elegance, vibrancy, and charm,
Broken by life's endless blows.
Times of Babylon and the golden gate,
Wiped away by ravage and by hate.
Savaged throughout history,
The land I never got to see.

M Madani, 2007

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Introduction

> It is in the realm of experience inaugurated by psychoanalysis that we may grasp along what imaginary lines the human organism, in the most intimate recesses of its being, manifests its capture in a symbolic dimension.
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> JACQUES LACAN
> *Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'* (1955), *Écrits*, Vol. 1

On 10 May, 2013, a protest march against the Syrian government held on London's Edgware Road turned violent when (Sunni) demonstrators began attacking (Shi'a) passers-by on the street.[1] In a YouTube video of the incident posted later that day entitled "Muslims fight Muslims in brutal clash on London streets", angry protesters can be seen carrying placards reading "Jihad today, Khilafa tomorrow", as well as images of Syrian president Bashar Al-Assad, former Iranian leader Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and spiritual leader of Hezbollah Hassan Nasrallah superimposed with the words "The Shi'a Enemies of Allah and Muhammad".[2] Five men were later convicted of assault for their involvement in the violence.[3]

This incident is indicative of a perceived rise in intra-communal antagonism amongst Sunni and Shi'a Muslims in the UK over the past few years. Indeed, several recent media articles have drawn attention to this trend, with sensationalist references to "sectarian hatred" being "at the heart of the British Muslim community"[4] and widespread "fears"

[1] The demonstration was organised by Salafist group Jund al-Sham and led by controversial Sunni Islamist preacher Anjem Choudry, the former leader of proscribed group Islam4UK.
[2] Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MtDB6hVNkEk, accessed 24 July 2017.
[3] Source: http://5pillarsuk.com/2014/05/13/five-men-guilty-of-assault-at-edgware-rd-anti-shia-protest/, accessed 24 July 2017.
[4] Source: https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/sectarian-hatred-at-the-heart-of-british-muslim-community-9qgpcxcqz2w, accessed 24 July 2017.

over a "deepening Sunni-Shi'a divide in the UK".[5] But how much truth is there in such grim assessments of Sunni-Shi'a relations in Britain, and to what extent do such antagonisms indicate a rise in intra-communal sectarianism?

This thesis takes such examples as a starting point from which to theorise an alternative understanding of sectarianism within the UK context; using the case study of the Iraqi Shi'a diaspora in London as a lens through which to understand the complex social, political, historical, psychological, and affective dynamics productive of such intra-communal antagonisms. In particular, I am interested in addressing the questions of *how* and *why* Shi'a ethno-religious identity is becoming sectarianised and politicised within the British diasporic context. While eschewing primordialist or essentialist understanding of sectarianism as a natural product of underlying ethno-religious "sects", I am equally concerned to distance myself from any kind of normative characterisation of sectarianism as a necessarily "bad" thing. Rather, the term "sectarianism" as defined and applied throughout this thesis should be understood as a fundamentally *descriptive* category; one that highlights processes of identity formation and mobilisation in which certain kinds of in- and out-group identity boundaries are prioritised over others. In this way, identity discourses that work to construct the category of "Shi'a" as conceptually and empirically distinct from the category of "Sunni" (and vice-versa) are *necessarily sectarian*, no matter what their normative or emotive content.

In this sense, sectarianism is less about the cultivation of intra-communal antagonisms founded on a logic of mutual hatred as about the move towards the production of discrete and mutually exclusive identity categories that are undergirded by at least some sense of in-group ethno-religious commonality. Such a characterisation of sectarianism has theoretical and analytical implications for the argument of the thesis as a whole, and,

[5] Source: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-31691120, accessed 24 July 2017.

crucially, it is my contention that positive affirmations of in-group identities (e.g. "I am Shi'a") can unconsciously work to foster antagonisms for those who fall outside the parameters of such boundaries (i.e. "Sunnis", "non-Muslims", etc.). In this sense, sectarianism should be understood as an unconscious and socially-produced discursive by-product of Shi'a-specific identity construction, and not as a conscious move towards violence or antagonism between Shi'is and Sunnis (though it may eventually lead to such conflict under certain circumstances). Ultimately, the thesis seeks to address the question of Shi'a sectarianism within the British diasporic context and, in particular, to enquire into the ways in which Shi'a ethno-religious identity as a category of belonging has become politicised and sectarianised across both time and space.

Although a significant amount of literature exists on the production and manipulation of sectarianism within the Islamic world (Ali, 2010; Byman, 2014; Dodge, 2014; Farouk-Alli, 2014; Gause, 2014; Haddad, 2014; Hashemi and Postel, 2017; Machlis, 2014; Makdisi, 1996; Matthiesen, 2013; Salloukh et al., 2015; Sluglett et al., 1993; Yousif, 2010; among others), very few scholars have focused on the way in which such concepts have come to be transferred and translated within the diasporic context. This is especially pertinent given the increasing demographic importance of Muslims in Britain and the West more broadly and the current perceived rise of Sunni-Shi'a antagonism within diasporic Islamic communities in the UK. Moreover, while there have been a number of important studies focusing on the internal identity-dynamics of Sunni communities in Western counties (Abbas, 2007; Cesari, 2004b; Haddad, 2002; Mandaville, 2003; Meer, 2008, 2010; Meer and Modood, 2009; Metcalf, 1996; Modood, 2003; Modood and Werbner, 1997; Roy, 2004; among others), there has been a dearth of serious scholarship that focuses exclusively on Shi'a Muslims within such contexts.[6]

[6] Notable exceptions include Flynn (2013); Scharbrodt (2015); Scharbrodt et al. (2017); Shanneik (2015); Spellman-Poots (2012); Tripp and vom Bruck (2017); and van den Bos (2012). However,

This thesis thus seeks to bridge the gap between current scholarship on intra-communal sectarianism in the Middle East and identity politics in Muslim communities in the West in order to present a study of Shi'a sectarianism in the UK in which "sectarianism" is understood as a socially-constructed unconscious by-product of discursive identity formation. In particular, I wish to make the case that the specificities of the diasporic experience – through the experience of exile and the cultivation of transnational links – and of the British domestic context – through the encounter with liberal "Western"[7] norms of secularism, humanitarianism, and multiculturalism – have contributed to the production of a particular kind of (sectarianised) Shi'a subject. This diasporic Shi'a subject at is simultaneously invested in the history, mythology, and theology of Shi'a Islam at the same time as it is oriented towards minority representation and ethno-religious self-determination in a way that replicates the increasing differentiation of identity discourses within the British multicultural context (Abbas, 2007; Aly, 2015; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009; Modood et al., 1997; Song, 2003). In this sense, the significance of the diasporic context has arguably produced qualitatively different forms of Shi'a sectarian identifications than those currently being articulated and mobilised in the Middle East and wider Islamic world. For this reason, it is equally important to explore the ways in which Western norms, ideals, and values have shaped particular articulations of what it means to be "Shi'a" in the British diasporic context as it is to understand the history and background of Shi'ism as both a religion and a transnational form of political mobilisation.

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most such studies approach Shi'a Islam from the field of Islamic Studies or Anthropology, and often neglect to examine the *political* implications of Shi'a identity formation.

[7] For the purpose of this thesis, I am loosely using the term "Western" as both a discursive and geographical signifier to refer to Europe and North America, and in particular the enduring legacy of military and colonial dominance of this part of the world over areas denoted as "non-Western". In this sense, my use of the term should be seen as predominantly marking a *discursive* rather than analytical boundary.

The central argument of this thesis rests on the contention that it is the result of this cross-pollination of ideas and ideals across contexts that has resulted in the emergence of a Shi'a-specific identity construction – what I call the "Shi'a subject"[8] – that, crucially, harbours an attachment to sectarianism as its unconscious by-product. The sectarianised diasporic Shi'a subject that forms the core of this inquiry – a discursive construction that works to constrain the kinds of identifications available to individuals – can thus be understood as a fundamentally *modern* product of multiple forces of subject-formation as experienced in the contemporary moment. As Deeb highlights in her work on pious Shi'a Muslims in Lebanon, "[t]he contemporary moment is one during which public religiosities have emerged across the globe… Such publicly engaged religiosities have contributed to the collapse of the notion that religion and modernity are incompatible" (Deeb, 2011: 4). In this sense, the contemporary forms of sectarianism experienced and articulated within the diaspora should be understood not as a throwback to some ill-defined primordial "essence", but rather as a logical outcome of global processes of liberalism, modernity, secularism, and diaspora (cf. Mahmood, 2015).

Rather than conceptualising sectarianism as a static social construct resulting from the discursive hegemony of modernity, or as an inevitable product of longstanding historical and theological disputes between Sunni and Shi'a Islam, this thesis seeks to foreground the significance of lived experience by excavating the ways in which articulations of the (sectarianised) diasporic Shi'a subject have changed across time and contexts. As Gaiser highlights in a recent edited volume, sectarian identification should be understood primarily as "a dynamic and conscious process of adoption, maintenance, and manipulation of certain types of… identities in particular places and at particular times by particular persons or groups of persons" (Gaiser, 2017: 62). Indeed, "for many people,

[8] My use of the term "subject" throughout this thesis draws on insights garnered from Lacanian psychoanalysis and is conceptually distinct from any sense of individual "identity" or "subjectivity". See below for a more in-depth discussion.

even an explicitly labelled sectarian identity can be fluid and contextually specific" (Ewing, 1997: 23). By prioritising the experiential and "lived" quality of Shi'a-specific identity articulations, I seek to foreground the ways in which multiple discursive forces across multiple sites work to cultivate "multiple subjective modalities" productive of the sectarianised Shi'a subject (Ewing, 1997: 35). In this way, this thesis offers an alternative conceptualisation of sectarianism as the unconscious of Shi'a politico-religious identity formation that takes seriously the differential ways in which individuals imagine, enact, articulate, and perform being "Shi'a" within the diasporic context. Cumulatively, the result of such individual identity articulations is to collectively produce and police the contours of the Shi'a subject at any given moment in time; and it is these processes of social subject formation that I am primarily interested in documenting here.

This theoretical and methodological preoccupation with the interior psychic lives of individuals, and its connection to the external material world, takes inspiration from the discipline of psychoanalysis, especially the work of Jacques Lacan. If psychoanalysis, as Lacan claims in the quote that serves as the epigraph to this thesis, can illuminate the ways in which human beings are rendered intelligible through inscription into a "symbolic dimension" represented by social reality, then the seemingly clear-cut division between internal (psychic) and external (material) worlds appears to dissolve. Indeed, one of the central preoccupations of this thesis is to take seriously the ambivalent relationship between psychic and material reality. As Navaro-Yashin argues:

> Why assume a separation between interiority and exteriority? Why conceive of human beings as distinct from the environments, spaces, and objects with which they coexist, correlate, or cohabit? Likewise, why presume that interiority (conceptualised as a separate entity) will always reign supreme, that it will,

> through its projections on the "outer" world, determine everything? (Navaro-Yashin, 2012: 23)

Here, then, sectarianism can be understood as a psychic, as well as material, reality in a way that seeks to unsettle the boundaries between the two. In order to undertake this theoretical endeavour, the thesis draws on insights garnered from psychoanalysis and critical discourse analysis as a way to foreground the processes of subject-formation that both inform and constrain the identity choices available to individuals. In particular, the concept of the *subject* drawn from Lacanian psychoanalysis is used as a way to distinguish between the Shi'a subject as a product of material and discursive power and individual practicing Shi'is who may or may not seek to align themselves with this subject through active practices of identification. It is the *sectarianised Shi'a subject* – its cultivation, articulation, and transformation through individual acts of identification within the diasporic context – that forms the core of the enquiry conducted here. Adopting Lacanian-inflected approach allows the thesis to maintain a conceptual and analytical distinction between the individual and the subject without collapsing the former into the latter as a product of discursive power (as in much poststructuralist theory).[9]

By focusing on the sectarianised Shi'a subject, rather than the individual, the theoretical framework employed here thus opens up scope for individual agency at the same time that it avoids the essentialist trap of reifying such sectarian identity constructions. Putting forward the case for a processual approach to Shi'a identity that understands it as the result of *active identification with the Shi'a subject by the individual*, the thesis adopts a multi-faceted approach that dovetails an empirical and methodological focus on

[9] See discussion in literature review, later in this Introduction.

micro-level and embedded practices of identification[10] with a wider examination of the various social and discursive phenomena that are productive of the Shi'a subject in the first place.

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Although the primary focus of this thesis is on the formation and crystallisation of the sectarianised diasporic Shi'a subject as a product of material, discursive, symbolic, and affective practices that are in turn embedded in contemporary power structures, the empirical case study that provides the material necessary for exploring such processes of subject-formation is that of the Iraqi Shi'a diaspora in the UK, with a particular emphasis on religiously practicing Iraqi Shi'is. The focus on Shi'a Islam, and Iraqi Shi'is in particular, is significant for at least three reasons.

Firstly, Shi'a Muslims have mostly been overlooked in studies investigating the status of Muslim minorities in Britain[11] and the West more broadly, and their experiences have often been either glossed over or simply relegated to a caveat or footnote in more mainstream studies on Sunni Muslims (Bowen, 2014; Cesari, 2004b; Grewal, 2013; Hopkins and Gale, 2009; Meer, 2010; Modood, 2003, 2006; Modood and Ahmad, 2007; Roy, 2004).[12] As van den Bos argues, "Shi'ism in Europe represents a particular realm of

[10] For a more detailed discussion of the ways in which micro-level identity practices can be understood as contributing to wider processes of identity change at the social and collective level, see Degli Esposti (2017).

[11] It is estimated that Shi'a Muslims make up around 15 percent of the 2.7 million Muslims currently living in Britain (Spellman-Poots, 2012), and come from a variety of socio-economic, ethno-national, political, and educational backgrounds; and from countries and regions as diverse as Afghanistan, Bahrain, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, South Asia, and East Africa.

[12] It should be noted that there is an existing and burgeoning literature on Shi'a minorities in Europe within the disciplines of Islamic Studies and Anthropology (Al-Khalifa Sharif, 2003; Flaskerud, 2014; Gholami, 2016; Scharbrodt et al., 2017; Scharbrodt and Shanneik, 2018; Spellman-Poots, 2012; van den Bos, 2012), but most of these studies focus on either the theology and religious practices of Shi'is or on the local domestic contexts in which they have settled, and there is very little that approaches the contemporary experiences and practices of diasporic Shi'is within a political framework.

organisation and a particular religiosity" that has mostly been "neglected" in studies of European Islam (van den Bos, 2012: 1). This is especially pertinent given the increasingly sectarian politics of contemporary geopolitical conflicts in the Middle East and their potential impact on diasporic communities in Europe. Indeed, within such a context, "Shi'i Muslims in the UK have become more assertive in the British public sphere, highlighting their distinct identities in response to the rise of anti-Shi'i sectarianism in the Middle East and presenting themselves as victims and opponents of militant Sunni movement" (Scharbrodt et al., 2017). Thus, the time is ripe for a more detailed study that treats Shi'a Muslims in the West as an object of analysis in and of themselves and that takes seriously the transnational dynamics of such globalised sectarian geopolitics.

Secondly, Iraqi Shi'is are both demographically and symbolically significant in the cultivation of a diasporic Shi'a subject in the UK context. Not only do Iraqi Shi'is represent some of the first waves of Shi'a migration and settlement in the UK, beginning from the late 1970s, Iraqis are also institutionally dominant in both the social and religious urban environment of London (where the majority of Shi'is in Britain live).[13] In a self-claimed "exhaustive" directory of Shi'a religious establishments provided by the official website of the UK's annual Arba'een procession (run by the Hussaini Islamic Trust), of the 19 London-based institutions listed, nearly half (nine) are run by Iraqis, while a quarter (four) are Iranian-run[14] (the rest are a mixture of South-Asian, Khoja, Lebanese, and minority branches of Shi'ism such as the Ismailis).[15] It is due to their institutional

[13] Although there are no accurate data regarding the ethno-national demographics of Shi'a Muslims in Britain (the UK census does not record religious sect), and it is likely that South Asians make up the demographic majority (especially if we include Khojas – East African Shi'is of South Asian origin), the majority of Twelver Shi'a religious and community institutions in London tend to either be founded and run by Iraqis, or have links to the Iraqi shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala.
[14] It should be noted that as a result of the politics of the Iranian regime, and especially the fallout of the 1979 Islamic revolution, the majority of Iranians in Britain tend to be religiously secular and non-practicing, hence the dominance of Iraqis (Gholami, 2016; Spellman-Poots, 2012).
[15] www.arbaeenuk.com/directorylist, accessed 25 Sept 2016. According to my own fieldwork data, 11 of the 15 Shia religious institutions in northwest London were founded or run by Iraqis. This figure does not include secular or non-religious Iraqi-run establishments, such as the Iraqi

dominance of the UK's Shi'a Muslim population that Iraqi Shi'is are thus fundamental in shaping both the social and psychic contours of this minority religious group.

Finally, the focus on practicing Shi'is of Iraqi national background is significant as a result of the specific historical and socio-political circumstances of the Iraqi diaspora and the highly politicised nature of Shi'ism in contemporary Iraq, where a violent form of sectarianism has become an increasingly salient fact of social and political life (Dodge, 2014; Haddad, 2014; Sluglett et al., 1993; Yousif, 2010). In particular, the recent rise of fundamentalist Sunni militant organisation Islamic State (ISIS), has served both to highlight and to foment Sunni-Shi'a sectarianism both within Iraq and more globally. Indeed, Iraq itself has significant religious, political, and symbolic power over the development of a globalised Shi'a-specific identity primarily due to its status as the historic "homeland" of Shi'a religious belief and practice as the locus of the Battle of Karbala in 680AD (Dabashi, 2011). Moreover, the transnational influence of the Shi'a religious establishment in Najaf and Karbala makes Iraqi Shi'ism a significant locus of enquiry into the status and development of Shi'a identity more broadly.[16]

Despite the institutional and symbolic dominance of Iraqi Shi'is within the context of diasporic London, however, this thesis will demonstrate that the question of ethnic or national belonging has become decreasingly salient for practicing Shi'is in the UK,[17] while categories of religious belonging (often couched in pseudo-ethnic terms) have gained increasing traction – especially within the younger generation of British-born Shi'is. Such a shift is part of a global trend produced by the increasing fluidity of

Cultural Centre, Al-Muntada Institute, or the London headquarters of the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP).

[16] The dynamics of this will be explored further in Chapter 1.

[17] Just as it has for practicing Sunnis, who have increasingly been drawn to a cross-cultural and decontextualised notion of transnational Islam (Cesari, 2004a; Mandaville, 2001; Meer, 2010; Modood, 2003).,

movement and ideas whereby "political identities are becoming increasingly disembedded from the context of the territorial nation-state" (Mandaville, 2003: 50) and, when it comes to Islam in particular, focused instead on notions of a "'global' or translocal community of believers in which racial, ethnic or national differences are irrelevant" (ibid: 18). For this reason, the thesis' empirical focus on Iraqi Shi'is in the UK should be seen as part of a wider preoccupation with the social, political, economic, and discursive forces that are contemporaneously shaping the contours of a cross-cultural and transnational diasporic Shi'a subject, and the ways in which articulations of this subject come to be implicated in the unconscious affective and material practices of sectarianism.

Before launching into a more detailed discussion of the theoretical framework that provides the architecture for the conceptualisation of sectarianism outlined in the thesis, it is first necessary to present a brief overview of the case study under scrutiny in order to contextualise and excavate the ways in which the development and articulation of a Shi'a-specific identity amongst Iraqi Shi'is in the UK has resulted in the fostering of sectarian attachments and antipathies within the diasporic setting.

Contextualising the Diaspora

In presenting a study of the Iraqi Shi'a diaspora, it is first necessary to delineate the object of analysis under consideration. Despite the rise in critical approaches to diaspora (Axel, 2001, 2002, 2004; Brah, 1996; Brubaker, 2005; Ong, 2003; Raman, 2003; Venn, 2009; among others), much of the literature continues to reify or essentialise any notion of "diaspora identity" along ethno-national (Safran, 1991; Cohen, 1996; Tölölyan, 1991) or cultural lines (Hall, 1990). Within such an essentialised framework, "diaspora identity" is most often studied and understood through the mobilisation practices of diaspora activists towards the homeland (see, for example, Adamson, 2012; Koinova,

2013). Conversely, while recent scholarship on the "Muslim diaspora" (Aitchison et al, 2007; Cesari, 2004; Meer, 2010; Modood, 2003; Roy, 2004) has prioritised trans-ethnic and trans-national forms of identification along religious lines, the heterogeneity of sectarian, ethnic, national, and cultural traditions encompassed by the catch-all term of "Islam" are rarely explored in full. This thesis seeks to problematise both essentialist frameworks that couch diaspora in cultural, ethnic, or religious terms, and unitary conceptions of "Islam" by focusing on the rise of a transnational and trans-ethnic diasporic *Shi'a* identity.

Drawing on the work of critical scholars of diaspora studies (Axel 2001, 2002, 2004; Brah 1996; Brubaker 2005; Butler 2001; Hall 1990; Kinnivall 2009; Ong 2003; Raman 2003; Venn 2009; Werbner 2005, among others), this thesis seeks to problematise the notion of "diaspora" as an ontological thing-in-the-world capable of being bracketed off and studied, and of the implicit assumption that a "diaspora" is both a pre-formed social entity and an agglomeration of individuals who have been scattered across the world and yet nevertheless all nurture an indelible link to the imagined diasporic homeland or place of origin. Rather, I take classifications of diaspora as "a globally mobile category of identification" (Axel 2004: 27), or as "a series of projected imaginaries of identity" (Werbner 2005: 758) as a starting point from which to theorise the formation of a Shi'a diasporic subject as a historically specific and temporally contingent discursive alignment.

This notion of diaspora as a process of belonging and identification thus offers conceptual clarity to the "dispersion of the meanings of the term" (Brubaker, 2005: 1) within the literature, and further acts as a corrective to the ontological primacy afforded to nation-states and territorial boundaries in classical diaspora studies by prioritising readings of "diaspora" that understand it as an "idiom, stance, and claim" regarding the

"way of formulating the identities and loyalties of a population" (ibid: 12). In this way, "being diasporic" should be understood as an orientation and *identification* with the diasporic subject, not as an ontological category in and of itself. Moreover, focusing on the construction of the *diasporic subject* rather than on the "place which is diaspora" (Werbner, 2002) thus productively engages psychoanalytic notions of subjectivity and identity within a wider conception of the political world that serves to foreground questions of affective, experiential, and phantasmatic attachments, and the various ways such attachments work to bind individuals to iterations and performances of the diasporic subject.

In this sense, my use of the term "Iraqi Shi'a diaspora" refers not to individual Iraqi Shi'is themselves, but to a discursively constructed "diasporic imaginary" (Axel, 2002, 2004) – itself a term borrowed from Lacanian psychoanalysis – maintained through temporal and corporeal processes of identification that work to produce diasporic subjects:

> *Imaginary* here is not an adjective that describes or qualifies the diaspora, its "people" or "community" as illusory or as a mere figment of some misguided imagination, Rather, the *diasporic imaginary* – used as a noun – indicates a precise and powerful kind of identification that is very real. (Axel, 2002: 423)

Indeed, I have encountered little evidence to suggest that the average Iraqi Shi'i living in London has any understanding of themselves as "diasporic" beyond their status as exiles or migrants, but rather seek to identify themselves with alternative iterations of the identity categories of "Iraqi" and "Shi'a" that circulate within the diasporic imaginary. For this reason, developing an understanding of the historical, political, social, and discursive processes that are productive of such terms becomes key to exploring the shift

away from Iraqi national identifications and towards the formation and crystallisation of a sectarianised Shi'a subject within the diasporic context.

Baghdad-on-Thames

There are currently no reliable figures pertaining to the size and demographic composition of the Iraqi population in the UK. According to the 2011 Census of Britain, there are an estimated 73,000 Iraqi-born individuals living in the UK, with the vast majority concentrated in London (Office for National Statistics, 2013). However, since this figure is neither up to date nor takes into account second or third-generation Iraqis born in Britain (not to mention those born in exile who later settled in the UK), it is safe to assume that the total number of diasporic Iraqis in the UK is much higher. For example, Zainab Saleh gives the total number of Iraqis in the UK as of 2005 as being between 282,000 and 350,000 (Saleh, 2011), while Nadje al-Ali gives a lower estimate of 100,000 (Al-Ali, 2007), and the Iraqi Embassy estimates between 350,000 and 400,000. In a comprehensive mapping exercise conducted in 2007, the IOM suggests there are a total of 240,000 Iraqis in the UK, including 125,000 in London alone (IOM, 2007). Due to the demographic composition of Iraq itself, as well as the political nature of much Iraqi migration to the UK (discussed further below), the vast majority of Iraqis in London tend to come from Shi'a backgrounds[18] – a fact that has arguably been significant in the shaping of a specifically *Shi'a* sectarianised diasporic subject, as illustrated throughout this thesis.

As with any diaspora population, Iraqi Shi'is in London represent a diverse amalgam of individuals from a variety of socio-economic, class, regional, ideational, and generational backgrounds, and who may have come to the UK at different times and under very

[18] Arguably, secular Iraqis from Shi'a backgrounds who have settled in the UK have adopted qualitatively different approaches and understandings of their ethno-religious "identity" than practicing Iraqi Shi'is, and as such are not included in this study.

different circumstances. The most significant waves of Iraqi immigration over the last few decades have coincided with a number of key political events in Iraq itself; and different political conditions in the homeland have led to differences in the economic, political, and sectarian demographics of Iraqis in the diaspora (al-Ali, 2007; al-Rasheed, 1991; Saleh, 2011; Interviews 1, 2, 4, 11, 20, and 23).

The largest wave of Iraqi migration to the UK took place under the regime of Saddam Hussain from 1979-2003, and for this reason was mostly (but not exclusively) characterised by middle- and lower-class Iraqi Shi'is (whether practicing or secular)[19] (Al-Ali, 2007; Al-Rasheed, 1991; Saleh, 2011; Spellman-Poots, 2012). The vast majority of these Iraqis eventually settled in London – as one of my interviewees noted: "London to Iraqis is considered a second home" (Interview 4). In this sense, the demographic dominance of Iraqis Shi'is both amongst British Shi'a Muslims (in terms of the number of religious and community institutions) and within the Iraqi diaspora itself makes this community an ideal case study for exploring the intra-communal dynamics within British Islam, and in particular of scrutinising the ways in which identity practices may either fuel or mitigate existing sectarian and political tensions between different Islamic sects in the UK.

Nevertheless, the vast majority of political and social mobilisation within the Iraqi diaspora in the late twentieth century was characterised less by religion and more by pre-existing political divisions that had existed in Iraq itself, especially when it came to opposing the Saddam Hussain regime (Kadhum, 2016). Indeed, a number of my research participants commented on the growing sense of a distinct yet heterogeneous Iraqi community in London throughout the 1980s and 1990s, especially in terms of political opposition to the Ba'thist regime in Iraq, with a strong representation of professionals,

[19] This includes Iraqi Faili Kurds, who follow Twelver Shi'ism.

intellectuals, and elites.[20] As one former opposition activist put it: "London was the centre of Iraqi opposition [in the 1990s]" (Interview 32); while another expressed that during this period "everyone was anti-Ba'thist and anti-Saddam" (Interview 10). In this sense, such mobilisation can be seen as typical of first-generation diasporans: politically active, oriented towards the homeland, and preoccupied with building community and social ties in the country of settlement (Adamson, 2002, 2008; Brah, 1996; Butler, 2001; Clifford, 1994; Koinova, 2009, 2011; Tölölyan, 1996; Werbner, 2002, among others).

Across ethnic and sectarian divides, therefore, the Iraqi diasporic subject during the latter part of the twentieth century was arguably characterised by a political and symbolic orientation towards Iraq as a homeland, often couched in nationalistic expressions of identity and belonging and organisational participation in official political and social bodies that operated transnationally between Iraq and the UK. It wasn't until the US-led invasion of 2003, following which a significant number of influential Iraqi political activists returned to Iraq to participate in the rebuilding of the country, that the sense of a unified "Iraqi" national identity in the diaspora began to disintegrate.[21] It was this fracturing of Iraqi diasporic identity that arguably paved the way for a rise in sectarian forms of identification, especially among the demographically and institutionally dominant Iraqi Shi'is.

For Iraqi Shi'is in the UK, the establishment and maintenance of religious institutions such as *hussainiyyat* (known colloquially as "Shia mosques", sing. *hussainiyya*) became especially important in exile as a result of the social and political status of Shi'is in Iraq – the practice and observance of certain Shi'a rituals, for example, was banned under the Saddam regime. As a result of such converging social and political factors, such Shi'a

[20] For a detailed study of diasporic activism oriented towards the homeland, see Kadhum (2016).
[21] The reasons for this are explored in detail in Chapter 1, and as such are not discussed further here.

religious institutions in exile assumed a significant political dimension in the emancipatory articulation of a hitherto suppressed Shi'a religious identity (Flynn, 2013), and, moreover, allowed Iraqis in exile to connect with others who found themselves in similar positions. Thus, "from the outset, there [was] an emphasis on the political dimension of the [Iraqi Shi'a] community and its political expression as part of its particular identity" (Flynn, 2013: 3). In other words, the mediation of the exile experience through the religious institutions of the *hussainiyyat* plausibly contributed to a diasporic identity that came to be intimately linked with Shi'a religiosity and political emancipation. Indeed, the tendency for migrant religions to become politicised as transgressive and/or emancipatory practices in the host society context has been widely documented (Alfonso et al., 2004; Levitt, 2008; Mandaville, 2001; Marston et al., 2005; Metcalf, 1996; Modood and Werbner, 1997; Schiffauer, 1988; among others) – Iraqi Shi'is, it seems, are no exception. The social and political context of Britain during this period, in which policies of multiculturalism and ethnonormativity governed the ways in which immigrant communities could articulate and perform their attachment to certain ethno-cultural identity categories, arguably played a key role in shaping the emergence of a specifically *Shi'a* ethno-religious identity in the diaspora.[22]

Having thus briefly outlined the empirical case study underpinning the thesis, I now turn to a more detailed exploration of the concepts of discourse, identity, and sectarianism in order to sketch out the theoretical framework on which the argument of the thesis is based and to place this argument within the context of the relevant scholarly literatures. The final part of this introduction will explore the research methodology underpinning the thesis' claims, before outlining the structure and content of each of the five substantive chapters, each of which explores different facets of Shi'a subject-formation within the diasporic context.

[22] This is explored further in Chapter 3.

Discourse, Identity, and the Sectarian Unconscious

Departing from studies that conceive of sectarianism as an ideological formation (whether primordial or discursive) consisting of a belief system that is productive of sectarian subjects (Dodge, 2014; Hashemi and Postel, 2017; Kadhum, 2016; Reidar, 2007; Salloukh et al., 2015; Sluglett et al., 1993; Weiss, 2010; Yousif, 2010), this thesis offers an alternative conceptualisation of Shi'a sectarianism that sees it as an *unconscious* product of identity formation within the discursively-constructed diasporic imaginary arising from the encounter between transnational Shi'a politico-religious theology and contemporary hegemonic power structures of liberal capitalism, humanitarianism, ethnonormativity, and minority representation within the British diasporic context. This reading of sectarianism prioritises a Lacanian understanding of identity formation that foregrounds the relationship between psychic and material reality through the concept of *discourse*, at the same time as it maintains a key analytical and conceptual distinction between *the subject of identity* and the individual and collective *practices of identification* that work to produce this subject.

Before fleshing out the theoretical architecture underpinning the argument of the thesis, it is necessary to explore the various uses (and misuses) of the term "sectarianism" within the literature in order to establish how the particular conception employed here differs from the majority of existing studies. Significantly, this thesis should be read as a critical intervention within the literature on sectarianism that simultaneously seeks to problematise the implicit assumptions often underlying the use of the term itself while offering an alternative conceptualisation of "sectarianism" that understands it as a normatively-neutral and fundamentally descriptive concept when applied to inter-communal antagonisms.

Problematising Sectarianism: From Primordialism to Poststructuralism

Despite its prevalence in discussions of communal antagonisms across a variety of contexts,[23] the term "sectarianism" is notoriously "slippery" (Kingston, 2013: 21), especially when employed as an explanatory device for individual or collection action. Moreover, the vast majority of studies that employ the concept seem either to take the meaning of sectarianism for granted, or condense it to the sensational quality of religious violence (often with implicit normative assumptions that regard sectarianism as an uncritically "bad" thing). Indeed, "sectarianism", under this reading, can be understood primarily as "a signifier ordinarily employed as a synonym for the anti-social or divisive acts, typically involving physical violence or intimidation of 'religious' paramilitary organisations" (Cairns, 2000: 438).

The problem with simply equating sectarianism with religious violence, however, is that such usage presupposes the existence and salience of religious groups and identities in the first place, and risks essentialising or reducing the complex social, economic, political, and discursive forces that go into producing sectarian identities to formulaic depictions of primordial ethnic, religious, or tribal ties. In the context of Sunni-Shi'a sectarianism, such a paradigm thus constructs each religious sect as quintessentially antagonistic social and political actors, monoliths locked in an eternal battle for survival and dominance.[24] A good example of such reductive essentialism can be found in the controversial myths of the "Shi'a crescent" and "Shi'a revival",[25] both of which construct

[23] Although contemporary use of the term is most commonly found in the context of plural societies such as in the Middle East (Byman, 2014; Dodge, 2014; Erkli, 2010; Gause, 2014; Louër and King, 2012; Makdisi, 2000; Salloukh, 2013), South Asia (Ali, 2010; Haqqani, 2006; Nasr, 2000; Zaman, 1998), and Northern Ireland (Anderson and Shuttleworth, 1998; Burton, 1979; McVeigh and Rolston, 2007), "sectarianism" may also be used to refer to any form of in- and out-group antagonism (Clarkson, 2013; Wilson, 1992).

[24] For a critical discussion of this tendency to reduce sectarianism to eternal historical antagonisms, see Hashemi and Postel (2017).

[25] In 2006, for example, the Council on Foreign Relations held a symposium entitled "The Emerging Shi'a Crescent" that aimed to address US foreign policy interests in the region. Despite the deluge of works that make use of such essentialist concepts, especially since the US-led Iraq invasion of 2003 (Amos, 2010; Barzegar, 2008b; Helfont, 2009; Horr, 2012; Nasr, 2000, 2004,

Shi'ism as a unitary politico-religious system whose influence stretches across a geographical area encompassing countries as diverse as Lebanon, Syria, Bahrain, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, and whose actors are engaged in an ongoing "proxy war" for ideological and geopolitical power (Barzegar, 2008a; Bröning, 2008; Cockburn, 2008; Helfont, 2009; Nasr, 2004, 2006, 2007; Proctor, 2008; Terhalle, 2007).

In this sense, the term "sectarianism" as applied to Sunni-Shi'a antagonism "tends to imply a static given, a trans-historical force – an enduring and immutable characteristic of the Arab Islamic world from the seventh century until today" (Hashemi and Postel, 2017: 5). Abdo neatly summarises the underlying assumptions of this position in her claim that "because religious difference is, by its nature, unresolvable, this would mean the violence now sweeping the Middle East is intractable" (Abdo, 2016: 5). Indeed, the prevalence of such approaches has arguably led to the distillation of any multifaceted concept of sectarianism into Sunni-Shi'a antagonism *tout court*, in which Shi'a Islam in particular, "often tends to stand in for the 'sectarian condition' par excellence" (Weiss, 2010: 8).

In contrast to such primordial essentialism, recent critical scholarship has tended to adopt a more "post-culturalist" approach that underscores both the ethno-cultural foundations of sectarian identities and "the very modern and productive power of sectarianism" as a discursive social construction (Salloukh et al., 2015: 3). Such interventions often rest on an implicit commitment to constructivism, in which ethnic, religious, and cultural identity "is not fixed, but is rather a political construct based on a dense web of social relationships that form in the context of modernity" (Hashemi and Postel, 2017: 7). Indeed, some scholars have even gone so far as to assert that

2006, 2007; Walker, 2006), the notion of a "Shi'a crescent" or "Shi'a revival" has also attracted considerable criticism in the literature (Barzegar, 2008a; Bröning, 2008; Chaulia, 2007; Proctor, 2008; Terhalle, 2007).

"sectarianism and modernity can no longer be simplistically understood as inherently antagonistic" (Weiss, 2010: 6). Within this scholarly tradition, sectarianism is understood less as "a static thing-in-itself, but rather a 'way of doing things'" (Weiss, 2010: 13), a manner of organising and meaning-making within the social world that is productive of communal antagonisms. In this sense:

> [F]ar from being a relic of a traditional pristine past, sectarianism is a modern constitutive Foucauldian socioeconomic and political power that produces and reproduces sectarian subjects and modes of political subjectification and mobilisation through a dispersed ensemble of institutional, clientelist, and discursive practices… Much like other disciplinary institutions – such as the modern state, the prison, or the clinic – the sectarian system and its institutional, political, economic, and symbolic ensemble aim at manufacturing docile sectarian subjects who abide by the rules of the sectarian political economy and its ideological hegemony. (Salloukh et al., 2015: 3–4)

While a number of productive studies have been spawned from such approaches, exploring the historical (Clarkson, 2013; Makdisi, 1996, 2000; Peteet, 2008; Weiss, 2010), social (Dodge, 2014; Farouk-Alli, 2014; Sluglett et al., 1993), economic (Yousif, 2010), political (Haddad, 2014; Kadhum, 2016; Matthiesen, 2014; Reidar, 2007; Salloukh et al., 2015), gendered (Deeb, 2011), geographical (Anderson and Shuttleworth, 1998; Visser, 2010), and institutional (Al-Marashi, 2008; Cairns, 2000; Hoffman, 2014; Kingston, 2013) dynamics of sectarianism as a system of meaning, it is my contention that such postmodern approaches fall into the opposite trap of the primordialists. Namely, by placing a greater emphasis on the structural factors and power relations that go into producing sectarian identities in the first place, this literature runs the risk of evacuating or flattening individual agency by reducing actors to "docile sectarian

subjects" (Salloukh et al., 2015: 4) trapped in a sectarian system of which they themselves are the products.

Moreover, such conceptualisations often implicitly assume an ideological commitment to sectarianism either through the workings of "the sectarian system" (ibid) or through the conscious manipulation of "sectarian entrepreneurs" who stand to profit from the cultivation of sectarian sentiment within the general population (Machlis, 2014; Matthiesen, 2013; Salloukh et al., 2015; Yousif, 2010; Zubaida, 2014). As Hashemi and Postel argue: "the idea of manipulation thus figures centrally in this school of thought. By emphasising in-group similarities and out-group differences, as well as invoking the fear of assimilation, dominance, or annihilation, ethno-religious leaders can stimulate identity mobilisations" (Hashemi and Postel, 2017: 6). While there is much disagreement within the literature regarding the extent to which these identities can be manipulated (as well as how they are formed in the first place), there is a general consensus regarding the potential for identity mobilisation by leaders and elites that necessitates at least some kind of ideological commitment on the part of these political actors. In other words, sectarianism, under this reading, is the product both of contemporary power structures *and* of the conscious manipulation by sectarian actors; a conception that implicitly denies agency to ordinary individuals by seeing them either as passive "sectarian subjects" within a wider hegemonic system or as the victims of manipulation by sectarian elites.

In this way, much of the literature on sectarianism can be seen to either fall into the trap of reifying sectarian identities as stemming from some kind of intractable primordial "essence", or alternatively denying the salience or agential potential of such identity categories in the first place and writing them off as the effect of structural power relations or elite manipulation. The former of these approaches serves to conflate

individuals with the sectarian identities they espouse and attributes the category of identity with the capacity for producing political outcomes above and beyond individual agency (as if it were identities themselves that act, not people); while the latter results in marginalising or silencing the capacity for individual agency when it comes to the adoption and expression of such identities (Haddad, 2011). Both approaches are problematic in their tendency to either overstate or understate the coherence and relevance of ethno-sectarian identities, and relate to broader issues surrounding the study of identity as a whole.[26] The crux of this conundrum, I would like to suggest, lies in the lack of conceptual clarity regarding the terms "identity", "individual", and "subject" that has partially arisen from the rising popularity of poststructuralist and post-culturalist accounts that often reduce sectarian identities to the product of power in ways that flatten the distinction between the individual and the subject and ultimately undermine the capacity for individual agency at the same time as they construct "sectarianism" as an ideological product of power.

In order to counter such conceptual confusion, this thesis puts forward an alternative conceptualisation of sectarianism that takes seriously the contingent and antagonistic nature of contemporary power relations at the same time as it seeks to explain individuals' (unconscious) attachments to sectarianism in a way that does not vacate their capacity for agential choice or risk essentialising problematic ethno-religious identity categories by equating sectarian identity with the individuals who espouse it. The theoretical framework employed for such a project makes use of psychoanalytic formulations of the distinction between the *individual* and the *subject* in order to highlight how processes of identity formation, including those involving sectarian identities, are not necessarily consigned to fall into either the essentialist or the poststructuralist trap. In particular, I draw on the insights offered by Lacanian

[26] See discussion in following section.

psychoanalysis and critical discourse analysis in order to offer a framework for the study of sectarian identity as an unconscious by-product of the *active and reiterative practices of articulation and identification with the sectarian subject* that is conceptually separate from any notion of a pre-existing individual or self. It is to this project that I now turn.

Theorising Identity: From Individual to Subject

The shifting sands of individual and collective "identity", a term at once analytically problematic (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000) and yet one that evades critical deconstruction (Hall, 2000), represents the site of multiple and intersecting socio-political processes. And yet, despite such scholarly confusion, the concept of "identity" has drawn increasingly attention in recent decades, especially when it comes to the study of ethnic and religious identity constructions. This thesis takes the preoccupation with identity in the literature on sectarianism and ethnic conflict as a starting point from which to problematise the blurring of the distinction between individuals/selves and political and social subjects in studies of intra-communal antagonism. In particular, it is my contention that the rise of constructivist and post-cultural accounts, despite their success in foregrounding the role of power in the production of sectarian identities, has further muddied the conceptual waters by not clearly distinguishing between the subject-as-individual and the subject of discourse in ways that ultimately obscure the object of inquiry.

This thesis draws on the theoretical insights offered by poststructuralist accounts of identity formation as a product of discursive power (Butler, 1997; Foucault, 1977, 1982, 2012; Howarth et al., 2000; Howarth and Torfing, 2005; Laclau and Mouffe, 2001; Lloyd, 1996, 1999; Milliken, 1999; Müller, 2008) while insisting on the importance of maintaining an analytical distance between the concepts of the *individual* and the *subject*, understood as the subject of discourse. This distance is maintained by drawing on

elements of Lacanian psychoanalysis in order to build a theoretical framework that facilitates the study of the sectarian subject as conceptually distinct from the individuals who identify with it. Fundamental to this project is an understanding of discourse that extends beyond a purely linguistic category and sees it as the ensemble of social utterances, performances, and practices that constitute the social world:

> The *discursive* can be defined as a theoretical horizon within which the being of objects is constituted. In other words, *all* objects are objects of discourse, and their meaning depends on a socially constructed system of rules and significant differences. (Howarth et al., 2000: 3)

Crucially, this is not to make any ontological claim about the existence or otherwise of an external "reality", but rather to highlight the socially-constructed nature of the *meaning* invested in this reality. As Laclau and Mouffe argue:

> The fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse has nothing to do with whether there is a world external to thought… An earthquake or the falling of a brick is an event that certainly exists, in the sense that it occurs here and now, independently of my will. But whether their specificity as objects is constructed in terms of "natural phenomena" or "expressions of the wrath of God", depends upon the structuring of a discursive field. (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 108)

Identities, under such a discursive reading, are *social constructs* (which may or may not be predicated on physical and material differences such as skin colour, religious practice, political affiliation, etc.) and are therefore not reducible to any kind of innate or pre-existing "essence" but are revealed to be deeply implicated in collective understandings and meanings generated about the social world. Moreover, adopting such a holistic

understanding of discourse illuminates the way in which individuals "are always internal to a world of signifying practices and objects" (Howarth et al., 2000: 3) and are therefore unable to escape the discursive logic of such constructions. Discursive power, in other words, is productive both of the social world as a whole and the place of the individual within it.

Turning attention away from the problematic notion of an ontologically prior "self" and towards the category of the "subject" as the subject of discursive power, such approaches thus allow for the study of identities as the product of power relations without the limitations of constructivism.[27] And yet, despite such theoretical advancements, it is my contention that the uptake of poststructuralist and discursive approaches to the study of identity – especially those that draw on the work of Michel Foucault – has led to the dispersal and dilution of key concepts such that many theorists seem to use the notions of the individual/self and subject interchangeably (often in the rather cumbersome formulation of "individual subject"), rather than clearly delineating between the two. In particular, the prominence of Foucauldian accounts of discursive subjectivity, in which individuals are *made subject* by the all-encompassing nature of power relations, has exacerbated the confusion regarding the relative conceptual roles of the individual and the subject. Indeed, it is arguably the dual meaning of the word "subject" – i.e. to be *subject to* and the *subject of* particular articulations of discursive power and interest – that has played a significant role in the conceptual blurring between the subject-as-

[27] This is not to claim that all poststructuralist and discursive approaches are coterminous, but rather that such approaches share an orientation towards the social world that necessitates a preoccupation with the subject of discourse, however defined (Howarth and Torfing, 2005). It is the plurality of these definitions that I am specifically addressing here, not the relative merits of various methodological approaches within the discursive tradition.

individual and the subject-of-discourse while simultaneously seeming to theorise out the role of human agency by reducing it to an effect of discursive power.[28]

While Foucault's insights regarding the nature and role of power as a productive force that circulates amongst various actors in the social world (Foucault 1980, 1982, 1991, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c) have been fundamental in challenging the realist preoccupation with coercive power (Dahl, 1957), the tendency for Foucauldian scholars to gloss over the distinction between the individual and the subject (or even to equate the two)[29] has resulted in multiple and sometimes contradictory definitions of political subjectivity, especially as a result of Foucault's own shift from the subject of discourse to the subject of power, and ultimately to "the individual [as] an effect of power" (Foucault, 1980: 98; Bevir, 1999).[30] The result of these divergent approaches, I would like to suggest, is the spread of conceptual confusion in which studies of identity often fail to specify their object of inquiry, or, alternatively, switch between different meanings of various key concepts without due diligence.

At this juncture, it is worth exploring the way in which the field of psychoanalysis – and Lacanian psychoanalysis in particular – has played an important role in redefining our

[28] For critiques of the Foucauldian tendency to overlook individual agency, or simply reduce it to a product of power, see Doty (1997); Epstein (2010); Ewing (1997); Lloyd (2005); and Navaro-Yashin (2012).

[29] It should be noted that although Foucault himself articulated a conceptual difference between the subject and the individual (most notably in *The Subject and Power*), his insistence on the capacity of power to "make individuals subjects" (Foucault, 1982: 331) effectively served to erase this difference in discussions of the social world, pre-saturated as it is by existing power relations and subjectivities. In this sense, while Foucault asserted the significance of maintaining a distinction between the individual and the subject, in practice his theoretical framework rarely allows for this difference to bear any conceptual weight.

[30] Compare the following quotes, for example: "power that at first appears as external, pressed upon the subject, pressing the subject into subordination, assumes a psychic form that constitutes the subject's self-identity" (Butler, 1997: 3)– in which the subject is implicitly equated with the individual; and "a *subject-position* refers to a *position in a discourse*. It is a place-holder, a linguistic category" (Epstein, 2010: 17) – in which the subject is clearly delineated as the subject of language.

understanding of the concepts of both the individual and the subject by taking seriously the relationship between interior psychic life and exterior social reality in ways that maintain individual agency while acknowledging the socially-constructed nature of discursive reality (Frosh and Baraitser, 2008; Grossberg, 2010; Hollway, 2004, 2006; Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; Stavrakakis, 2002, 2007; Venn, 2002; Walkerdine, 2002). Rather than representing a departure from the world of politics, such unconscious internal processes are crucial to the construction, articulation, and performance of political identity (including ethno-religious sectarian identities) such that building an understanding of psychological processes "is not just the continuation of politics by other means; it is politics itself" (Papadopoulus, 2004: 5). In this sense, "questions of fantasy, fiction, and the unconscious are critical for understanding cultural and political processes" (Peterson, 2007: 59), especially the role such processes play in facilitating certain modes of social or political behaviour and sidelining others. It is to this psychoanalytic dimension of identity I now turn.

i. Psychoanalysis and Politics: Between Interior and Exterior Worlds

Psychoanalysis rests on the premise that conscious thought is not sufficient to explain human motivations and actions; rather, it is necessary to take into account the unconscious drives and desires lurking beneath the surface of consciousness. For this reason, psychoanalysis is often credited with bringing attention to the "silent dimension of social and political life" that works to structure the field of individual action and collective social practices (Glynos and Stavrakakis, 2010: 225). Indeed, in the words of Ernesto Laclau, psychoanalysis might be seen "as the only fruitful approach to the understanding of human reality" (Laclau, 2004: 326). However, strict readings of psychoanalysis have the potential to focus too narrowly on the internal psychic

processes of subjectivity and self-reflexivity,[31] thus prioritising the internally-bounded human self at the expense of a more holistic discursive understanding of the constructed nature of the social world (Hollway, 2004; Navaro-Yashin, 2012).

In the Lacanian reading of psychoanalysis used throughout this thesis, the unconscious itself arises through the individual's entry into the social world and is thus a fundamentally *social* product. It is this blurring of the distinction between social, material, and psychic realms that makes Lacanian psychoanalysis a useful tool in the study of political identities, since it helps foreground the discursive nature of identity formation at the same time as it avoids the trap of equating individuals with the identities they espouse (Lacan, 1968, 2002, 2004). In order to understand the analytical and methodological implications of such an approach, I will offer a brief outline of Lacanian theory and in particular the significance of the distinction between the (pre-social) individual and the (socially and discursively constructed) subject when it comes to the study of political identities.

For Lacan, the world is structured according to three realms: the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic (Lacan, 1958, 2004, 2006; Frosh, 2012; Laclau, 1990; Stavrakakis, 1999; Žižek, 1999, 2006). On a psychic level, the self exists in a pre-social state as raw, unmediated desire, unbounded by the logic of social order – this is the realm of the Real, the excess that escapes the constraints of the other two orders and defies explanation or understanding. However, since the Real is always in a position of excess and can never be fully expressed (because expression itself requires language, which is socially constructed), it is in the Imaginary and Symbolic orders that the desire of the individual

[31] For a critical discussion of the various schools of classical psychoanalysis and an account of relational approaches, see Hollway (2004), Walkerdine (2002) and Venn (2002, 2009). For a more methodological critique of the inside/outside distinction, see Navaro-Yashin (2012) and Stopford (2004).

comes to be articulated. In this way, Lacanian theory is predicated on a conceptual distinction between the pre-social, unmediated self (or individual) and the (socially-constructed) *subject* as expressed through the projection of certain images of subjective identity within the Imaginary realm on the one hand, and through the discursive articulation of social and political identity within the Symbolic realm on the other.

For the purposes of this thesis, I am less interested in the specular realm of the Imaginary (which in Lacanian theory is central to the formation of subjective identity)[32] than in the inscription of the individual into the socially-constructed Symbolic realm and the consequent production of *social and political identity*. In Lacanian theory, the Symbolic order is the ensemble of signs and practices that make up the social order, and is structured according to the logic of language – in other words, the Symbolic is akin to the concept of the *discursive* discussed above. In order to become recognised as a social being, the self must submit their pre-social desires and drives to the social logic of Symbolic order via the medium of language (Lacan, 2004). Only by aligning themselves with particular discursive *subject positions* can individuals gain meaning as social subjects. In this way, language and discourse come to determine both what individuals can say and the potential ways they have of speaking about the social world and their place within it.

This brief outline of Lacanian theory helps to illuminate the way in which the cohesive pre-social self posited by both realist and constructivist theories of identity is marked as problematic from the start. Indeed, "psychoanalysis is founded on the rejection of traditional individualist conceptualisations of the subject" (Stavrakakis, 2008: 1037–8). According to Lacan, there is simply no recognisable self that exists prior to or outside of

[32] For a discussion of the significance of the Imaginary in the formation of subjective identity, see Fink (Fink, 2017), Frosh (2008), Lacan (1968), and Stavrakakis (Stavrakakis, 2002).

the Symbolic realm; rather, what exists is an ensemble of unmediated desires that are given form and substance through submission to the discursive logic of the Symbolic order through identification with the *subject*. In this sense, "the ego, the reflexive 'I' (the Cartesian subject) is a fantasy. It does not exist as a cohesive entity" (Ewing, 1997: 27). Rather, the self can only gain meaningful existence through identification with the subject by articulating itself as an "I" or a "me" within the discursive Symbolic order (Epstein, 2010; Laclau, 1994). This framework takes seriously the discursive construction of social reality while refusing to fall into the poststructuralist trap of reducing individuals to mere products of discourse – instead, there is an active and agential process of identification that is required in order for the individual to enter the Symbolic realm that is nonetheless constrained by the discursive contours operating within the particular context in which that identification is made. Within a Lacanian framework, therefore, we move from an essentialist to a processual understanding of identity (Guillaume, 2007; Lloyd, 2005) where "identity" does not refer to some property or facet of the self but rather to *an active practice of identification with the subject of discourse*.

However, because this Symbolic order is socially constructed and never of the individual's own making – and thus "other" – the individual is necessarily alienated in entering it since it can never fully encompass the entirety of their interior psychic life (Frosh, 2010; Glynos and Stavrakakis, 2008; Hook and Neill, 2008; Lacan, 2004, 2006; Laclau, 1994). This is the key to the Lacanian notion of the "lacking subject". Since every discursive realm is defined and constrained by what lies outside it – its constitutive other – and is thus never complete in and of itself, all discursive systems (including that of the Symbolic order) are necessarily incomplete and lacking (Fink, 1995; Lacan, 2004; Laclau, 1990; Laclau and Mouffe, 2000; Žižek, 1999). What this means is that the discursive subject that forms the core of social identity is *itself lacking*. As Verhaeghe (1998: 175)

lucidly puts it in relation to the notion of personal identity: "the very kernel of our personality is an empty space: peeling off layer after layer of identification in search of one's personality, one ends up with a void, with the original lack." For this reason, any attempt by the individual to identify with an identity category (understood as the subject of discourse) is therefore equally incomplete and lacking; and thus precipitates a constant re-articulation and re-iteration in a vain attempt to seek the impossible fullness of identity: "What we have then… is not identities but *identifications*, a series of failed identifications" (Stavrakakis, 2002: 29).

The individual is thus trapped in an incorrigible bind; on the one hand, "one has to identify with *something*" (Laclau, 1994: 3; emphasis added), while on the other hand the subject with which the individual seeks to identify is exposed as hollow and lacking (Campbell, 1998; Doty, 2000; Epstein, 2008; Hansen, 2006; Smith, 2000; Zehfuss, 2001). For this reason, the process of identification is never complete and constantly in flux; perpetually shifting and reiterating itself in a doomed attempt to paper over the silences and cracks inherent in every discursive construction. Such an active and (re)iterative understanding of identity also takes seriously the differential and contingent nature of various discursive power structures across various times and contexts. Within this framework, then, the notion of any kind of coherent or stable identity emerges as a *fantasy*; in the words of Stuart Hall: identity "is, then, a process of articulation, a suturing, an over-determination... There is always 'too much' or 'too little' – an over-determination or a lack, but never a proper fit, a totality" (Hall, 2000: 17). This is where the Lacanian concept of *ideological fantasy* comes into force. For Lacan, the function of ideological discourse is predominantly "to 'cover-over' or conceal the subject's lack by providing a *fantasy* of wholeness or harmony" (Howarth, 2013: 247). In the following section, I offer a brief exegesis of the Lacanian notion of ideological fantasy, before turning to the implications of such a theoretical framework for the argument of the thesis as a whole.

ii. Identity and Ideology

Lacanian theory builds on the materialist concept of ideology developed by scholars such as Marx (Marx, 2010; Marx and Engels, 1972), Mannheim (Mannheim, 2013), and Althusser (Althusser, 1976, 2006) in which the consciousness of individuals is determined by the workings of the social world. Under such readings, ideology functions primarily as a "mental fiction" (Mannheim, 2013) produced by the ensemble of material practices and that works to maintain "the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser, 1976: 152–159). For such scholars, it is all but impossible to conceive of social practice without ideology, since it is ideology that plays a central role in maintaining the contemporary alignment of social structures by masking the true nature of those structures. Lacan, and Lacanian-inspired theorists such as Laclau and Žižek, take this move one step further, exposing the way in which ideology functions not only to obscure the material workings of the social world but also to paper over the discursive instability inherent in any form of identity construction by binding individuals to specific iterations of the subject through the workings of *fantasy*.

For Lacan, ideology cannot simply be reduced to a rationalist preoccupation with "conscious, well-articulated systems of belief" (Eagleton, 2014: 221); rather, ideological formations involve attempts to "fix" the instability of the Symbolic order by papering over the lack inherent in any discursive articulation. In other words, ideology can be understood to represent "the point where power impacts upon certain utterances and inscribes itself tacitly within them" (Eagleton, 2014: 223). The way in which ideology performs this function is through the inscription of particular words and phrases that work to structure the meaning of a particular discourse (what Lacan calls *points de capiton* and Laclau and Mouffe call "nodal points"). These nodal points often take the form of what Laclau and Mouffe call "empty signifiers": terms such as "justice", "equality",

"order", etc. whose function it is to paper over the lack of social closure within any given discourse (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001). In this sense, then, "the articulation of a political discourse can only take place around an empty signifier that functions as a nodal point" (Howarth et al., 2000: 9). Of course, the way in which such nodal points function are contextual and contingent – and are themselves dependent on the socially-constructed meanings of the discursive Symbolic order – and thus expose the way in which discursive power alignments shift and rearrange themselves over time and across contexts. As Glynos argues:

> The link between ideology and power is generally taken for granted. More and more, so too is the link between power and systems of meaning. It is no longer uncommon to find analyses of ideological power conducted in terms of the 'naturalisation' of meanings and patterns of meaning. Such naturalisations effectively conceal the *political* moment in which decisions could have been otherwise made on account of the irreducible contingency that inhabits the dynamics of socio-political discourse. (Glynos, 2001: 192)

Žižek, in his application of Lacanian theory, takes this deconstruction of ideology one step further. For Žižek, the empty signifiers that work to "fix" or "quilt" discourse are themselves complicit in the Symbolic order, and take the form of particular norms that help to maintain the socio-political *status quo* (Žižek, 1989). These "master signifiers" do more than simply "fix" the meaning of particular discourses; they also work to structure the desire of the pre-social self by managing its entry into the socio-symbolic order. For Žižek, it is ideological *fantasy* that works to smooth over the inherent gaps in the system of signification by shaping the articulation of desire:

> Fantasy thus animates and manages desire; it teaches us how to desire. But just as fantasy can never live up to its promises (because no fullness exists), so desire is never satiated; it is condemned to repetition and failure in search of the missing object. (Kapoor, 2014: 1134)

In this sense, while the pre-social self *desires* the fullness of identity promised through identification with the subject of discourse, this desire can never be entirely fulfilled since the subject itself is lacking (as discussed above). It is this fundamental failure that lies at the heart of the power of ideology; ideology works to bind the self to (various iterations of) the subject by promoting the fantasy that its desires can and will be fulfilled – but the very impossibility of this fulfilment is what leads to a sense of dissatisfaction and thus requires a perpetual process of (re)identification with the subject in the first place. The pre-social self is thus trapped in a never-ending cycle of desire and alienation, in which it is "sold" the lie of the fullness of identity – a fullness it desperately desires. Ideology thus works to paper over the fundamental lack at the heart of subjective identity by promoting the fantasy of "identity".

Key to this understanding of ideological fantasy is the Lacanian concept of *jouissance* – what Žižek calls the "hidden kernel of enjoyment" (Žižek, 1989) – which designates the sense of pleasure derived from dissatisfaction (such as in the perpetual failure to fully identify with the subject of discourse). For Žižek, *jouissance* is key to explaining the formation of political community and identity, and can elucidate the affective and emotive mechanisms behind things that "stick", such as why people become so attached to concepts and value-systems such as nationalism or xenophobia (Žižek, 1989, 2000, 2005). In this sense, *jouissance* is a crucial element to the successful functioning of fantasy – in order for the subject to desire attachment to the ideological order (provided by fantasy), it must first come to *enjoy* this attachment (through *jouissance*). For this

reason, fantasy is a crucial element in the way ideology works to obscure the inconsistencies inherent in the Symbolic order and render participation in it enjoyable (Žižek, 1989, 2012).

Taking inspiration from this theoretical paradigm, this thesis understands attempts to construct a cohesive and coherence "Shi'a" ethno-religious identity in the diasporic context as an *ideological fantasy* predicated on the (always-already impossible) desire for the fullness of subjective identity. It is through the (unstable) cultivation of a discursive "Shi'a community", predicated on a shared sense of "Shi'a identity" that this ideological fantasy works to structure the desire of individuals by determining their sense of "belonging" to this community. Moreover, the production of a Shi'a-specific identity category predicated on the subjective desire for belonging forms part of a wider ideological fantasy sustained by the contemporary hegemonic power structures of neoliberalism and consumer capitalism whereby in-group identities are becoming increasingly streamlined and bounded via the logic of market segmentation. For this reason, not only should sectarianism be understood as an unconscious by-product of Shi'a-specific identity formation, it it also a necessary and inescapable product of the inscription of the ethno-religious Shi'a subject into the global ideological postmodern order.[33] As Žižek argues:

> Today's postmodern ethnic or religious "fundamentalism" and xenophobia are not only not "regressive" but, on the contrary, offer the supreme proof of the final emancipation of the economic logic of the market from the attachment to the ethnic Thing. (Žižek, 2000: 215)

[33] This process of ethno-religious inscription into the global market productive of the sectarianised Shi'a subject is explored in detail in Chapter 5.

In this sense, the diasporic Shi'a subject can be seen as an ideological construction, one that is simultaneously the contingent product of contemporary discursive and political alignments and that channels the desires and attachments of individuals by promoting iterative practices of *identification*. Such a conception thus takes seriously the very real affective and emotional attachments individuals cultivate towards the Shi'a subject (whereby to be "Shi'a" is understood as a fundamentally positive and emancipatory identity articulation aimed at ethno-religious "belonging") at the same time as it seeks to deconstruct those attachments and expose the way in which they are channelled by the manipulation of desire through the workings of discursive power. In this sense, the notion of a coherent and stable "Shi'a identity" functions as an ideological fantasy that channels the desire of individuals to identify with this subject at the same time as it unconsciously produces sectarianism as the by-product of such identity practices through its inscription in the contemporary (ideological) power structures of liberalism, equality, humanitarianism, minority rights, and consumer capitalism.

Diasporic Fantasies: Ethics, Ideology, and Subject Formation

Where does such a theoretical framework lead, in practice, when it comes to the study of transnational political identities such as ethno-sectarian categories of identification? Firstly, adopting a Lacanian conception of the subject as a discursive product of the Symbolic order makes it possible to avoid the trap of reifying group identities (such as the tendency to reify the sectarian categories of "Sunni" and "Shi'a" as primordial essences) and instead focus on the ways in which individuals perform their identification with the sectarian subject (the "I" or "me" who articulates themselves as "Sunni" or "Shi'a" in a relationship of mutual exclusivity and political antagonism). In this sense, the focus of inquiry is no longer on the nature and essence of sectarian identity *per se*, but rather on the practices and processes that are productive of the *sectarian subject* as a

discursive formation and which lead to its (re)articulation and (re)iteration across contexts.

Secondly, the Lacanian foregrounding of antagonism and alienation produced by the lacking subject throws into sharp relief the contingent nature of individual and collective practices of identification with the sectarian subject and calls into question the discursive underpinnings that have produced this subject in the first place. In other words, a Lacanian lens allows us primarily to view all social identities as products of contingent and antagonistic discursive power (and therefore political by definition) – in this case the identity of the sectarian subject – and therefore to study the workings of such identities through a methodological focus on the articulatory practices of identification enacted by individuals and groups in relation to these identities, at the same time as it maintains an analytical distance between individuals and the sectarian identities they espouse.

Thirdly, adopting a Lacanian-inspired approach to ideological fantasy exposes the extent to which the construction of a cohesive or coherent "Shi'a identity" is fundamentally lacking, and predicated on a desire for the (impossible) fullness of identification. In this sense, while the promotion and articulation of a Shi'a-specific identity is necessarily sectarian (in that it prioritises ethno-religious categories of identification over all others), this sectarianism is an *unconscious by-product* of identity-formation, obscured by the fantasy of a coherent "Shi'a identity". In other words, rather than being an ideological construction in and of itself, which would be suggestive of some kind of coherent belief system with normative implications for the individuals who express it, sectarianism can be understood as the necessary but unconscious effect of practices of identity formation operating within the context of ideological fantasy. By emphasising the role ideology in the sectarianisation of the Shi'a subject, it is thus possible to

foreground the role of fantasy and desire in maintaining subjective attachments to the sectarian unconscious; thus precipitating a methodological focus on individual lived experience.

In this way, clearly delineating between the individual and the subject not only sidesteps the realist and constructivist problem of the ontologically prior self, but adopting a processual approach to identity formation and articulation also helps to account for the multiple, shifting, fragmented, situated, contextual, hybrid and contingent ways in which such identities come to be articulated and manifested in the fabric of everyday life. In the case of diasporic Iraqi Shi'is, once the focus is shifted away from any kind of posited unitary Shi'a politico-religious identity and towards the construction and articulation of the Shi'a subject through an antagonistic identification with the lacking subject of discourse (i.e. away from the individual and towards the contingent processes underpinning the formation of such identities in the first place), the question transforms from one pertaining to the functioning of a Shi'a sectarian identity to one preoccupied with the formation and articulation of a *sectarianised Shi'a subject* and the various power structures invested in fostering and maintaining the political salience of that subject. It is this Shi'a subject (itself contingent, lacking, and reliant on antagonism) that serves as the object of analysis here. I should stress, however, that I am not claiming the sectarian Shi'a subject to be the only articulation of Shi'a identity currently available to individuals in the diaspora; rather, this subject is a product of specific discursive practices embedded in contemporary politics and discursive modernities (hence the emphasis on contingency) and points to the changing salience of "Shi'a" diasporic identity over time and across contexts.

In particular, it is my contention that the diasporic encounter between politicised constructions of Shi'a ethno-religious identity and hegemonic liberal discourses of

humanitarianism, minority representation, and consumer capitalism has produced the ideological contours of a Shi'a-specific identity construction that inevitably results in sectarianism as its unconscious by-product. As a result of this emphasis on the relationship between sectarianism, liberalism, and modernity, part of the contribution of this thesis will be to illuminate the link between the ethical cultivation of a humanitarian sensibility and the promotion of intra-communal antagonism and violence through unconscious attachments to sectarianism. Contemporary society is arguably living through an "ethical turn", whereby claims and grievances that once would have found political expression are increasingly being articulated in the language of apoliticised morality (Bourg, 2007; Davis and Womack, 2001; Eastwood, 2015; Fassin, 2014; Rancière, 2007). This has the dual effect of simultaneously decontextualising political conflicts at the same time as it flattens and distils the relevance of collectives and institutions in favour of cultivating a moral sensibility geared towards the nebulous concept of "humanity" (Rancière, 2007: 31–34). As Rancière notes: "properly understood [the ethical turn] signifies a mode of symbolic structuration of the community that empties out the political core that constitutes it" (2007: 32). Fassin goes on to expound on the way this turn to humanism has resulted in the evacuation of antagonistic moral sentiment from the political sphere:

> A significant evolution of contemporary society has been the banalization of moral discourse and moral sentiments in the public sphere, the insistence on suffering and trauma in the interpretation of a multiplicity of social issues, the focus on human rights and humanitarianism in international politics, as well as the invocation of ethics in a wide range of human activities, from finance or development to medicine and research, from the re-discovery of bodily practices of the self in religious and secular worlds to the social expectation of the subjects' autonomy. (Fassin, 2014: 433)

While there is considerable scholarly contention regarding whether or not the concept of ethics can be equated to that of morality, within the field of the anthropology of ethics, at least, there is a certain amount of consensus regarding the analytical distinctness of these two terms (Davis and Womack, 2001; Eastwood, 2015; Fassin, 2011, 2014; Faubion, 2012; Hutchings, 2010; Laidlaw, 2013). Drawing on this literature, this thesis adopts a definition of morality that sees it primarily as the ideological pursuit of the "good" (in the Aristotelian sense), while conceptualising ethics as those "codes of behaviour or sets of values that set out what is right to do within particular contexts" (Hutchings, 2010: 6). In this sense, while ethics and morality are inextricably intertwined, the former can be understood as a specific set of practices geared towards the achievement of the latter – in other words, ethics is key to processes of ideological *subject formation* (Eastwood, 2016; Faubion, 2012; Foucault, 2012).

Part of the focus of this thesis, therefore, will be on the ways in which the "banalization of moral discourse" (Fassin, 2014: 433) has entered into articulations of Shi'a identity by paying attention to the kinds of ethical discourses that contribute to the formation of an ideological (and politicised) Shi'a-specific minority identity. Just as the invocation of humanitarian intervention in the context of war can paradoxically legitimate the further use of violence (Bellamy, 2006; Chesterman, 2001; Coker, 2001; Douzinas, 2003; Fassin, 2011; Weizman, 2011), or the invocation of humanitarian aid can work to perpetuate the stigmatisation and marginalisation of the non-Western world (Belgrad and Nachmias, 1997; Chesterman, 2001; Hoffmann, n.d.; Kapoor, 2013, 2014; Macrae, 1998), this thesis contends that the rise of normatively-inflected discourses in relation to the assertion of a Shi'a-specific identity may also function as an ideological construct that unconsciously works to produce a form of sectarianism that is itself founded on a logic of ethical humanitarianism. In this sense, sectarianism can be understood as a direct (if

unconscious) product of the contemporary world, in which globalised norms of justice, equality, humanitarianism, and minority rights are gaining increasing salience and representation across different contexts.

For this reason, a focus on the ethical parameters of the Shi'a subject as a product of identity-formation should be seen not as a commentary on whether or not this subject is "good" in the normative sense, but rather as an exposition of the ways in which the production of the Shi'a subject is predicated on an ethical and ideological preoccupation with "*being* (a good) *Shi'a*". This emphasis on the Shi'a subject as an *ethical* subject thus serves to highlight the underlying affective, emotive, and contingent processes working to produce this subject as a product of discursive political power. As Mahmood (2011: xiii) highlights: "political projects are not only the result of coalitional organising, ideological mobilisation, and critical deliberation. They are predicated upon affective, ethical, and sensible capacities that are often ignored as consequential to the analysis of politics."

Within the contemporary neoliberal capitalist moment, the ethical commitment to humanitarianism, justice, and minority rights thus functions as an ideological fantasy that works to bind individuals to particular iterations of the Shi'a subject (for example, in claims towards "Shi'a rights" and "Shi'a pride") that simultaneously obscures the sectarian unconscious produced by such identity formations. In this sense, the sectarianised Shi'a subject can be understood as part of a wider global trend towards the specificity and particularisation of ethno-religious, cultural, and racial identity categories as cultivated by neoliberal discursive power and the segmentation of the "market for identities" produced by the workings of consumer capitalism (Comaroff, 1996; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009; Modood and Werbner, 1997; Navaro-Yashin et al., 2002). Ultimately, this thesis does not seek to offer any kind of normative judgement

regarding the cultivation, articulation, and propagation of the sectarianised Shi'a subject; rather, I am interested in documenting the multiple and shifting ways in which this subject has emerged within the contemporary diasporic imaginary and is itself reflective of wider processes of minority identity formation and subjectivity within the modern world.

Methodology: (Re)defining Sectarianism

> Every particular study is a many-faceted mirror… reflecting the exchanges, readings, and confrontations that form the conditions of its possibility, but it is a broken and anamorphic mirror (others are fragmented and altered by it). (De Certeau, 1988: 44)

The problematic nature of researching identity – something that is by definition subjective, elusive, and open to interpretation – needs to be confronted head on and not evaded in a study such as this. As well as being politically, historically, and contextually determined, "the subject is a shifting and always changing intersection of complex, contradictory, and unfinished processes" (Flax, 1993: 108). For this reason, I do not understand the evidence gathered during the research process as offering a holistic or comprehensive view of the social world, but rather as offering a "partial" (Soss, 2006) and fragmentary glimpse at the multiple and complex processes that come together to create specific forms of political identity – in this case, that of the sectarianised Shi'a diasporic subject. The theoretical approach of the thesis thus lends itself to a qualitative study in which the object of research is the play of the political in "its multiple metamorphoses", as manifested at the site of everyday practice (Navaro-Yashin, 2002: 3).

Due to the thesis' focus on the multiple (re)articulations of the sectarianised Shi'a subject across time and space, I inevitably prioritised the personal and experiential in my methodological approach as a way of gaining access to the everyday processes involved in the production, management, and policing of this subject. The methods adopted for this research were therefore primarily qualitative, in order to build a more comprehensive picture of the "social process of meaning-making" as embedded in different contexts (Soss 2006: 139). The primary research for the thesis was conducted over a period of 18 months between June 2014 and December 2015, and combined elements of ethnographic participant observation, interviews (I conducted a total of 32 semi-structured and 50 informal interviews, as well as innumerable conversations and interactions throughout the research process), and discourse analysis of primary sources. In addition, and as a result of my focus on the *Shi'a* diasporic subject as imagined, articulated, and performed by practicing Shi'is, I attended a number of religious gatherings (known as *majalis*, sing. *majlis*), both at private homes and at *hussainiyyat* throughout the research process, including a total of ten 'Ashura *majalis* and the 2014 and 2015 annual 'Ashura and Muharram marches on London's Edgware Road. In June 2015, I also participated in a three-week pilgrimage tour to Iran aimed at second-generation diasporic Shi'is, which included visits to the cities of Qom, Mashhad, Esfahan, and Tehran, as well as two weeks of English-language *hawza* classes in Qom and Mashhad.

While the methodological approach of this thesis is thus primarily qualitative and interpretive, my experience of conducting fieldwork for this project has similarly required the cultivation of an ethnographic sensibility with regards to the (re)iterative process of the research itself. For this reason, the theoretical and empirical focus of the thesis has changed throughout the research process in response to my findings. Rather than seeing this as a flaw, I have come to understand the (re)iterative process of field

research as being fundamental to the expansion of knowledge within my chosen field. As Kapiszewski, Maclean, and Read argue: "iteration (the updating of elements of research design as information acquired in the field is analysed) is critically important to way in which field research contributes to the generation of political knowledge and development of theory" (Kapiszewski et al., 2015: 18). The thesis' ultimate focus on sectarianism as an unconscious by-product of identity formation should thus be understood as an empirically-grounded product of my research findings, and not as a pre-formulated hypothesis constructed within the confines of the allegorical ivory tower prior to entering the field.

Although the bulk of the fieldwork for this thesis was conducted over a period of 18 months in 2014-2015, the scope of the research itself extends far beyond this time-frame and encompasses the entirety of my interactions with Iraqi Shi'is in London since early 2011. Indeed, the initial inspiration for the study conducted here – ultimately in a very different iteration than first imagined – came from my personal relationship with Iraqi Shi'is who had been deported under the Saddam Hussain regime as being "of Iranian origin" (*taba'iyya Iraniyya*).[34] Originally, my interest was primarily in collecting personal testimonies of these deportations and documenting the ways in which the enduring legacy of the Ba'th regime under Saddam Hussain had shaped the identities of these individuals in the diaspora. However, through spending time amongst Iraqi Shi'is in London I came to realise that although the deportations were significant, they were only a small part of a larger puzzle when it came to articulations of Shi'a ethno-religious identity within the diasporic British context. In particular, I was surprised to encounter narratives and discourses that emphasised the importance of "Shi'aness" and Shi'ism in ways that replicated the logic of other kinds of minority identity constructions through an emphasis on justice, equality, humanitarianism, and minority rights in ways that

[34] See the discussion in Chapter 1.

transcended the national or cultural origins of the various individuals who expressed such attachments. In this way, I was able to trace an emerging shift among diasporic Iraqi Shi'is away from nationally-bound identifications with "Iraq" and towards a transnational and trans-ethnic concept of "Shi'aness" couched in ethno-religious terms.

Set against the background of rising sectarian tension in the Middle East – especially the fomenting sectarian violence in Iraq and Syria and the rise of radical Sunni groups such as Islamic State (ISIS) – the timing of my research thus played a significant factor in shaping the kinds of data I was able to procure. The foregrounding of sectarianism within the thesis – a term that I was initially keen to avoid at all costs, both as a result of its negative connotations and as a result of my fear of inadequately representing the complexity of Shi'a identity by reducing it to its sectarian manifestations – is thus a direct reflection of the kinds of discourses, attachments, and articulations I encountered in the field. In particular, my primary theoretical intervention to reconceptualise sectarianism as an *unconscious by-product of minority identity formation* has grown out of direct interaction with individuals and groups who primarily see themselves as building an emancipated and positive "Shi'a identity" that can be used to combat the perceived rising tide of "anti-Shi'ism" and "Shi'aphobia" around the world.

In this sense, the thesis' prioritisation of sectarian identification should not be seen as an attempt to flatten or gloss over the heterogeneity of Shi'a identity formations within the British diasporic context, but rather as a preoccupation with one particular discursive formation of what it means to be "Shi'a" in the contemporary world that seeks to explore the multiple, fluid, and ambivalent ways in which individuals can come to articulate their sense of shared "Shi'aness" at the same time as it acknowledges the political salience of particular (sectarianised) constructions of Shi'a identity as articulated in the contemporary moment.

At the time of writing, intra-communal sectarianism between Muslim communities in the West is becoming more pertinent than ever, and the enduring conflicts in the Middle East and elsewhere within the Islamic world are increasingly being translated into the domestic spheres of countries such as the UK – whether through the recent spate of attacks perpetrated by British-born Muslims inspired by the nihilistic doctrines of ISIS and other such militant groups or through the ongoing securitisation of Islam and the British Muslim population via government policies such as Prevent. By presenting an alternative understanding of sectarianism that seeks to foreground the significance of *modern projects of minority identity formation and articulation*, it is my hope that this thesis will form part of a wider scholarly intervention that seeks to understand the mechanisms and processes that work to produce sectarian antagonisms, rather than simply seeing these antagonisms as uncritically "bad" things to be combatted through muscular interventions predicated on a logic of violence and securitisation.

Chapter Outline

Since the primary theoretical preoccupations of this thesis revolve around the multiple and differential processes of subject-formation productive of the sectarianised Shi'a diasporic subject, each of the five substantive chapters presented here can be seen to represent five different discursive sites within which this subject has come to be cultivated and articulated – and thus five different manifestations of the Shi'a subject across time and space.

Chapter 1 adopts a Lacanian-inflected analysis in order to explore the emergence of a politically-invested discourse regarding the role and function of the signifier "Iraq" within the Iraqi-Shi'a diasporic imaginary. As a whole, the chapter traces the ongoing shift from nationalistic to ethno-sectarian forms of identity construction within the Iraqi

Shi'a diaspora through an exploration of the historical, affective, and contemporary forces productive of various forms of identification and belonging within the diasporic imaginary. The first part of the chapter focuses primarily on the history of Iraqi Shi'a migration to the UK and the specific context of the Ba'th regime under Saddam Hussain to foreground the ways in which Shi'a ethno-religious identity has been discursively marked from the outset due to the structurally sectarian nature of Ba'thist Iraq and the traumatic experience of exile and migration endured by Iraqi Shi'is. In particular, I document the ways in which nostalgic attachments to the signifier "Iraq" as the lost homeland of exile have both endured and been transformed within the diasporic context.

Continuing this preoccupation with the discursive signifier "Iraq", the second part of the chapter traces the way in which the rupture precipitated by the US-led invasion of 2003 and the ensuing ethno-sectarian violence within Iraq, as well as the contemporary rise of militant (Sunni) Islamist group ISIS, has led to the fragmentation of diasporic identity formations such that "Iraq" has come to be articulated primarily as "Shi'a-Iraq" through its status as the spiritual and historical "home" of Shi'a Islam and the contemporary discursive battleground between ("good") Shi'a Islam and ("bad") Sunni Islam. Overall, Chapter 1 presents an historically and empirically grounded exposition of the discursive identity shift from nationalistic to ethno-sectarian identity categories within the contemporary diasporic imaginary that, I argue, is productive of a particular kind of sectarianised Shi'a diasporic subject in which "Shi'aness" is increasingly being decoupled from "Iraqiness" and constructed as an identity category in its own right.

Chapter 1 thus lays the empirical and theoretical groundwork for the discussion in Chapter 2, which focuses primarily on the move towards forms of identification and belonging that foreground Shi'a ethno-religious specificity. In particular, I focus on the cultivation of what I call the "ideal" Shi'a subject through the enduring power of the Shi'a

theological establishment and on the historical emergence of a politically-inflected Shi'a discursive ethics founded on victimhood and emancipation and its transformation in the contemporary moment through the rise of militant Sunni groups such as ISIS. The first part of the chapter focuses on the transnational nature of Shi'ism through a study of the religious and political authority of the clerical establishment in Iraq and Iran. In particular, I seek to draw out the ways in which the intersection of Shi'a clerical authority with enduring transnational religious and political networks – including the geopolitical influence of the Iranian Islamic Republic – has contributed to the formation of an idealised Shi'a subject embedded in networks of scholarly interests and patronage. This preoccupation with the ideal Shi'a subject is then fleshed out through an historical exploration of the politicisation of Shi'a religious mythology throughout the latter part of the twentieth century and on the cultivation of a Shi'a-specific ethics of victimhood and emancipation through the Karbala paradigm.

Taken together, the first two chapters of the thesis thus provide the necessary historical and political background to understand the contemporary shift from *Iraqi*-Shi'a subject to (Iraqi-)*Shi'a* subject by exploring the kinds of subjective attachments available to individuals when identifying with the signifiers "Iraqi" and "Shi'a" over time and space. In Chapter 3, I turn to the context of diasporic London in order to understand the ways in which the encounter with the British social and political context has been formative in shaping the contours of the sectarianised Shi'a subject – in other words, to what makes this subject *diasporic*. Part of this project involves exploring the relationship between (Shi'a) Islam and the British state, as well as the ways in which (Iraqi) Shi'is move, engage, and live within the urban setting of diasporic London.

Crucially, Chapter 3 makes the case that the British government's implementation of multiculturalism founded on a logic of ethnonormativity has been influential in defining

the types of ethnic, religious, and political subjectivities available to diasporic (Iraqi) Shi'is, while the domestic social context of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment post 9/11 has contributed to the emergence of a Shi'a-specific ethics of victimhood and identification, often defined in opposition to "radical" Sunni Islam. Moreover, the significance of the diasporic encounter, in which Shi'a Muslims from various national and cultural backgrounds have increasingly come together under the identity category "Shi'a", has contributed to the cultivation of a transnational and trans-ethnic ethno-religious understanding of "Shi'aness" predicated on sectarian belonging.

Having thus traced the emergence of the sectarianised Shi'a subject among Iraqi Shi'i diasporans in the UK as a discursive product of multiple factors and power relations, the final two chapters of the thesis concern themselves primarily with the way in which this subject is currently being articulated, performed, and conceptualised within the contemporary diasporic imaginary. In particular, it is my contention that the development of a transnational and trans-ethnic conception of "Shi'aness" as a bounded identity category is a product of the encounter both with liberal normative discourses, such as those of "equality", "justice", and "human rights", and of the commodification of identities on the global marketplace. Chapter 4 explores the first half of this equation through a detailed analysis of what I call the discourse of "Shi'a Rights" which, I argue, has emerged as a direct product of the diasporic encounter between Western liberal humanitarian norms (understood as ideological constructs) and the complex political, theological, and social history of Shi'ism as a minority religious identity. Moreover, the rise of "Shi'a Rights" is fundamental both to the production of the Shi'a subject as an *ethical subject* and to the unconscious sectarianisation of that subject through the discursive prioritisation of *Shi'a* rights over those of all other minorities. In other words, while the contemporary diasporic Shi'a subject represents a *positive* articulation of Shi'a identity (where it has become an ethically "good" thing to identify as "Shi'a"), this subject

also works to unconsciously (re)produce sectarianism through the necessary creation of an Other against which to define itself.

In the fifth and final chapter, I continue my preoccupation with contemporary articulations of the (sectarianised) Shi'a subject by excavating the ways in which this subject has been permeated by the logic of neoliberal capitalism and inscribed into the global economy through practices of commodification and fetishisation. In particular, I explore the discursive construction and symbolic resonance of the identity category "Shi'a" as it has come to be represented within the international marketplace through the proliferation of what I call "Shi'a objects". Significantly, it is my contention that the symbolic construction of "Shi'aness" as an ethno-religious identity category in its own right has been facilitated by the logic of consumer capitalism whereby the production of minority identities is bound up with the workings of the global market. In this sense, the sectarianised Shi'a subject can come to be understood as a thoroughly modern product of contemporary forces of power, globalisation, capitalism, and consumerism in a manner that replicates other kinds of group-based minority identity formations, and not as a throwback to some kind of essentialised or primordial sectarian "essence".

In this way, the thesis progresses thematically from an historically-grounded understanding of the *Iraqi*-Shi'a subject as experienced and articulated through the lived reality of exile, diaspora, and melancholia (Chapter 1), to iterations of the (Iraqi-)*Shi'a* subject through the integration of Shi'a politico-religious theology and myth with the contemporary sectarian politics of Iraq and ISIS (Chapter 2), to the cultivation of a transnational and trans-ethnic *Shi'a subject* as mediated through the British domestic context (Chapter 3) and as articulated in relation to contemporary hegemonic discourses of humanitarianism and minority rights (Chapter 4) and the global workings of consumer capitalism (Chapter 5). Taken together, each of the five substantive chapters

offers a snapshot into one particular aspect of Shi'a ethno-religious subject-formation within the contemporary diasporic imaginary. While it is impossible to capture every facet of the sectarianised diasporic Shi'a subject – itself an ideological production that is multiple, fluid, contextual, and ambivalent in its various iterations – I have focused on five elements of discursive identity formation that I believe are key to the cultivation, production, articulation, and imagination of the sectarianised Shi'a subject within the contemporary diasporic context.

Chapter 1 – Iraq, Interrupted: From Nationalism to Sectarianism

Prologue: "Iraq Disappears"

Iraq disappears with
every step its exiles take
and contracts whenever
a window's left half-shut
and trembles whenever
shadows cross its path.
Maybe some gun-muzzle
was eyeing me up an alley.
The Iraq that's gone: half
its history was kohl and song
its other half evil, wrong

Adan Al-Sayegh, Rotterdam 1997

Within the diasporic imaginary productive of the Iraqi-Shi'a subject, the idea of "Iraq" functions as a symbol[35] – a hollowed-out signifier whose discursive contours have been filled with a variety of material and affective attachments. Iraq as an ideal and as a territorial entity has symbolic significance for exiled Iraqi Shi'is not only as the locus of diasporic attachment to the lost homeland, but also as a site for the inscription of Shi'a piety and mythology via the shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala. Moreover, the meaning and content of the signifier "Iraq" has changed over both time and space partly as a direct result of the experiences of exile and diaspora, and has been further implicated in the symbolic and material violence of the contemporary sectarian politics of the Middle East. In this sense, and as evocatively described in the Al-Sayegh poem quoted above, "Iraq" as historical homeland has "disappeared" with "every step its exiles" have taken away from it; but the "Iraq" that has "gone" was a fantasy – nothing but "kohl and song". There is also a significant genealogical element to the "disappearance" of Iraq within the diasporic imaginary, as each subsequent generation born outside the "homeland" is less and less likely to harbour direct memories of Iraq pre-exile. In other words, the diasporic experience has changed not only what it means to be "Iraqi" in the context of exile and displacement, but also the very meaning and symbolic resonance of the notion of "Iraq" itself.

But if the "Iraq" of exile has been lost, what has it been replaced by? In the contemporary diasporic imaginary, what kinds of discourses circulate regarding this lost Iraqi homeland, and what, if any, is the relationship between being "Iraqi" and being "Shi'a". For example, how is it possible for a third-generation British-born Shi'a Muslim of Pakistani origin to claim Iraq as her "home";[36] or for a Canadian-born Iraqi Shi'i to decide

[35] It should be noted that I am using the term "symbol" here in its idiomatic, not Lacanian sense. References to the Lacanian Symbolic order are capitalised following scholarly convention in order to distinguish it from common usage.

[36] Facebook post by Saarah B. on 14 November 2016 tagging her location as Najaf, Iraq, with the description "home is where the heart is".

to move to Karbala, away from her family and her social networks, in order to be closer to her "roots".[37] Similarly, how does it make sense for a second-generation non-practicing Iraqi of Shi'a background to declare that he feels "less Iraqi" today than ten years ago;[38] or for a group of second-generation British Shi'is from different ethno-national backgrounds to circulate a map of Iraq superimposed with the words: "the residence of our Shi'a"?[39] Such examples raise questions not only about the meaning and content of "Iraq" as a symbolic signifier, but also of its changing relationship to varying articulations of Shi'ism and "Shi'aness" within the diasporic context.

From the perspective of a Lacanian-inflected discourse analysis, "Iraq" functions as a nodal point ("*point de capiton*") within a discursive system that is productive of a specific type of diasporic Iraqi-Shi'a subject (Glynos and Howarth, 2007; Howarth et al., 2000; Lacan, 2002, 2004; Laclau and Mouffe, 2001; Žižek, 1989). And yet this is a signifier with multiple and shifting meanings, and that can never be eternally "fixed" within a lacking and incomplete system of signification. For this reason, each iteration of the signifier "Iraq" requires particular affective attachments that gloss over the inherent instability within the system itself, and undergird the potential for subjective identification. It is these fantasies of "Iraq", and the type of subject each (re)iteration of this signifier engenders within the diasporic context, that occupies the heart of this chapter. Moreover, a key enquiry undertaken throughout is the way in which the changing resonance of "Iraq" has been affected by the experience of exile and diaspora, and has in turn shaped the emergence of a sectarianised Iraqi-Shi'a diasporic subject. If Iraq has "disappeared" – i.e. faded in relevance when it comes to identity- and subject-formation within the diasporic imaginary – what kinds of subjectivities have emerged in its place?

[37] Informal conversation with Zayneb H, 15 June 2015.
[38] Interview 5.
[39] Image shared through Whatsapp on 17 February 2015.

Introduction

The sectarianisation of the diasporic Iraqi-Shi'a subject explored throughout this thesis, whereby nationalistic forms of identification have been superseded by forms of politicised ethno-religious belonging, has not happened in a vacuum. The subject, as outlined in the Introduction, is itself a product of ideological and discursive power, and is thus an effect of power relations that expose the workings of of political contingency (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001). In order to present a study of the sectarianised Iraqi-Shi'a diasporic subject, therefore, it is necessary to interrogate the ways in which the meaning and content of the identity categories "Iraqi" and "Shi'a", themselves products of contemporary power structures, have changed over both time and space, both independently and in relation to each other.

While the symbol of "Iraq" continues to loom large in the affective attachments of diasporic Iraqi Shi'is, both as the lost homeland of exile and the historical birthplace of Shi'a Islam, it is my contention that in the contemporary diasporic imaginary, these two symbolic visions of Iraq – "Iraq-as-homeland" and "Shi'a-Iraq" – have become decoupled both from each other and from any underlying sense of Iraqi ethno-national belonging. The result of this, I would like to suggest, is that the enduring attachment to Iraq as the lost homeland has been transformed in the diasporic space into a primary attachment to Iraq as the mythological and spiritual "home" of Shi'a Islam, in which contemporary political and sectarian conflicts have come to be inscribed with a Shi'a-specific logic of victimhood and identification. In such iterations, the physical territory of Iraq has been transformed from place of exile into the symbolic homeland of the Shi'a faith; where a Shi'a ethics of piety and ethno-religious belonging has been inscribed into the landscape of the country through the cultivation of affective and material links to the southern

shrine cities and through the politicisation of sectarian categories as a result of rising intra-communal violence post-2003.[40]

Moreover, this alternative symbolic function of "Iraq" as the contemporary battleground between ("good") Shi'a Islam and ("bad") Sunni Islam has led to forms of attachment which no longer require any ethno-national ties to Iraq itself but are instead invested with racialised and ethnicised notions of Shi'a belonging. In this sense, the symbolic function of "Iraq" is no longer relevant to Iraqis alone, but undergirds the formation of a sectarianised (transnational and trans-ethnic) Shi'a subject within the diasporic imaginary. In the context of diasporic London, where Shi'is from different ethno-national backgrounds increasingly come together under the all-inclusive banner of "Shi'ism" (Ridgeon, 2012; Scharbrodt and Shanneik, 2018; Spellman-Poots, 2012; van den Bos, 2012), the discursive effects rippling from the shift from "Iraq-as-homeland" to "Shi'a Iraq" are not limited to the experience of Iraqis themselves, but have taken on new resonance for all practicing Shi'is, especially with the recent rise of ISIS and other militant Sunni groups operating within Iraqi territory that represent both a physical and existential threat to certain forms of Shi'a identity constructions.

For this reason, the shift from nationalistic to sectarianised identifications within the Iraqi Shi'a diaspora should be seen as part of a wider trend away from forms of identification narrowly bound to the territorial entity of the nation-state and towards more fluid forms of subject-formation that emphasise in-group commonalities and reflect shifting global patterns of liberalism, commodification, and capitalism (as explored throughout this thesis). In this sense, while the focus of this chapter is on the

[40] One effect of this shift towards "Shi'a Iraq" has plausibly been the reconfiguring of the geographically imagined entity of "Iraq" from that of Mesopotamia – the "land of two rivers"; the "birthplace of civilization" – inspired by pre-Islamic history and culture to a territorial space configured by the Southern Shi'a shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala.

development and transformation of the signifier "Iraq" in shaping the contours of the Iraqi-Shi'a subject over time and space, the insights offered here should also be seen to speak to wider discursive and power alignments that are productive of a particular kind of sectarianised Shi'a subject within the diasporic context.

This chapter traces the emergence of a politically-invested discourse regarding the role and function of the signifier "Iraq" within the Iraqi-Shi'a diasporic imaginary. In particular, the focus is on the shift from Iraq as lost homeland (as experienced through the loss of exile and mediated by the encounter with Saddam Hussain's Ba'thist regime) to "Iraq" as a discursive place-holder for the cultivation of an ideologically-driven "Shi'a consciousness" (cf. Meer, 2010). This discursive shift, I suggest, is reflective of a broader shift in the identificatory practices of exiled Iraqi Shi'is for whom attachments to a specifically *Iraqi* form of ethno-national belonging have become tempered with, and eventually superseded by, an attachment to particular ways of being *Shi'a*. The genesis for this shift plausibly began as a reaction to the structural sectarianism experienced under the Ba'th regime – including the forcible expulsion of significant numbers of Iraqi Shi'is from the land they considered home[41] – and has developed against the backdrop of rising sectarian and communal violence within Iraq itself and the wider Middle East, as well as within the diasporic context of the British state. For this reason, it is important to understand the emergence of the sectarianised Iraqi-Shi'a diasporic subject as a product of both historical and contemporary power alignments; whether that be the political power of Saddam Hussain and the Ba'th Party, the religious and theological power of the Shi'a religious establishment (explored in Chapter 2), the bureaucratic power of British multiculturalism policies (explored in Chapter 3), or the violent and

[41] During the 1980s, and following the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the ensuing Iran-Iraq war, Saddam Hussain deported an estimated 200,000 Iraqi Shi'is of alleged "Iranian origin" over the border into the Islamic Republic (Cole, 2002; McLachlan and Joffé, 1984; Metz, 2004).

symbolic power of contemporary militant groups such as Islamic State (ISIS) and Iranian-backed Shi'a militias.

The primary purpose of this chapter is to trace the material and discursive architecture that underpin the shift from nationalistic to sectarian forms of identification – from "Iraq(i)" to "Shi'a" – and to understand the ways in which this shift has shaped the emergence of the sectarianised Iraqi-Shi'a subject within the diasporic context. Through an exploration of the Iraqi domestic and British diasporic contexts, this chapter thus lays the groundwork for Chapter 2, which focuses primarily on the cultivation of the ideal Shi'a subject through the enduring power of the Shi'a theological establishment and on the historical emergence of a politically-inflected Shi'a discursive ethics founded on victimhood and emancipation and its transformation in the contemporary moment through the rise of militant Sunni groups such as ISIS. Taken together, the first two chapters of the thesis provide the necessary historical and political background to understand the contemporary emergence of the sectarianised (Iraqi-)Shi'a subject by exploring the kinds of subjective attachments available to individuals when identifying with the signifiers "Iraqi" and "Shi'a" over time and space.

Saddam's Ghost: Shi'ism, Discourse, and the Diasporic Imaginary

> Because of Saddam, many Iraqis had to go around the world. At the beginning, Saddam was bad, but now, *Alhamdulillah* [thanks to God], Saddam has made the Shi'a, the followers of Ahlulbayt, spread all over the world. (Sheikh Morteza Maddahi)[42]

[42] Statement made during an English-language theology lesson in Qom, Iran, 8 June 2015, Source: author's fieldnotes.

> We can say thank you to Saddam for spreading Shi'ism to the world. (Interview 7)

Despite the diversity of the Iraqi Shi'a diaspora in the UK, comprising of individuals from different political, religious, socio-economic, and educational backgrounds, the largest wave of Iraqi exiles who came to settle in the UK throughout the 1980s and 90s had one fundamental thing in common: they left Iraq (either voluntarily or by force) as a result of the policies and actions of Saddam Hussain's Ba'th regime. While a sense of Iraqi national belonging remained very strong amongst first-generation diasporic Iraqis (Shi'a or otherwise) during the 1980s and 90s (Al-Ali, 2007; Al-Ali and Al-Najjar, 2013; Al-Khalidi et al., 2007; Al-Rasheed, 1994; Saleh, 2011), I would like to suggest that their experience of exile was intimately tied to the enduring legacy of the Iraqi Ba'thist state – both in fostering forms of political opposition against Saddam Hussain and in cultivating modes of identification and belonging that asserted discursive formulations of the category of "Iraqiness" and "Shi'aness" that explicitly opposed themselves to Ba'thist state discourse. Since the vast majority of those who made up the second wave of Iraqi migration to the UK left Iraq for politically-motivated reasons, and thus were victims of forced or coerced migration, there is an extent to which they felt the need to assert their sense of nationalistic belonging to Iraq in direct opposition to the Ba'thist state's attempts to delegitimise these individuals' attachments to their country of origin (Al-Ali, 2007; Al-Ali and Al-Najjar, 2013; Al-Rasheed, 1994; Alkhairo, 2011; Kadhum, 2016; Saleh, 2011).

For this reason, in order to build a comprehensive understanding of the diasporic Iraqi-Shi'a subject in the late twentieth century, it is first necessary to understand the relationship between the diaspora and the Iraqi Ba'thist state, and in particular of the enduring and haunting effects of Saddam Hussain's authoritarian regime. In this sense,

the Iraqi-Shi'a diaspora can itself be understood as a direct product of Ba'thist state power under Saddam Hussain. Iraq under Saddam – the Ba'thist Iraq of the memory of exile – thus functions as one particular articulation of the signifier "Iraq" within the diasporic imaginary; an Iraq whose material and symbolic significance has helped shape the contours of subjectivity within the diaspora.

"We are not Iranian": Shi'ism as Other in Ba'thist Iraq

In the Introduction, I presented a brief historical chronology of Iraqi emigration throughout the late twentieth century, and particularly of the role of the Ba'thist regime under Saddam Hussain in shaping the demographics of the Iraqi diaspora as a result of the state's persecution and marginalisation of politically and/or religiously active Shi'is. Here, I turn to the discursive and psychic underpinnings of Ba'thist constructions of "Iraq" and "Iraqiness", in order to highlight how the material and symbolic elements of the experience of exile came to be woven together in the diasporic imaginary to produce a particular kind of political (and politi*cised*) Iraqi-Shi'a subject. Significantly, the political, economic, and social, marginalisation of the Shi'a under Saddam, coupled with the politicised construction of Shi'ism as "Iranian" and "other" by Ba'thist state discourse (Bengio, 1998; Davis, 2005; Davis and Sassoon, 2012; Lewental, 2011; Sassoon, 2011) came to redefine the boundaries of what it meant to be both Iraqi *and* Shi'a within Saddam's Iraq.

Consider the following statement from one of my interviewees, a prominent critic of the Ba'th regime:

> The Ba'th institutionalised the basic idea that your nationality, your identity, was connected with your belief about yourself. So you were an Arab if you thought yourself an Arab… The Ba'th actually institutionalised that in 1977 with the

> Legal Reform Law,[43] and if you look at the language it says an Iraqi is one who believes in the principles of the Ba'th revolution, who believes in the leading role of the party… and if you waver in any shape or form in those beliefs your very Iraqiness is called into question. (Interview 1)

In other words, the very foundation of Ba'thist discourse was built on the institutionalisation of ethno-national identity in which claims to be Iraqi were only legitimised if they conformed to a recognisable discursive pattern (i.e. that of Arab Ba'thism) (Bengio, 1998; Davis, 2005; Davis and Sassoon, 2012; Sassoon, 2011; Tripp, 2002). As the interviewee notes, according to this logic, those who did not conform were not Iraqi *by definition* and therefore eligible for expulsion from the national body (either symbolically or literally).

Despite the overwhelming consensus among scholars of Iraq that the Ba'th regime under Saddam Hussain was not ideologically sectarian, there are a number of factors that worked to render the Ba'thist state *structurally* sectarian in its fostering of patrimonial ties according to which Arab Sunnis were afforded disproportionate privileges through the institutionalisation of tribal and familial forms of loyalty and patronage (Adib-Moghaddam, 2007; Al-Ali, 2007; Al-Marashi, 2003; Baram, 1997; Batatu, 1978, 1981; Bengio, 1998; Dodge, 2005; Sassoon, 2012; Tripp, 2007).[44] One particular manifestation of the structural inequality of the Ba'thist state was the violent persecution and repression of all forms of political opposition. Moreover, under the Saddam regime, all forms of Shi'a religious practice were publically banned – not necessarily as a result of

[43] In 1977, the Iraqi government issued an amendment to the original 1924 Iraqi Nationality Law that allowed anyone of "Arab" heritage to apply for Iraqi citizenship (barring Palestinians). According to Nakash, "the Ba'th used the nationality law… to deny a great number of Shi'is, including Fayli Kurds, Iraqi nationality, citing their Iranian origins" (Nakash, 2011: 87).
[44] Shi'a Muslims nominally make up around 60-70 per cent of the Iraqi population, but since at least the Ottoman era have historically been marginalised in both political and social spheres by the dominant Sunni minority.

discrimination *per se*, but due to Saddam Hussain's paranoia of the potential for an Iranian-aligned Shi'a "fifth column" inside Iraq, coupled with his well-documented dislike of any kind of large public gathering not sanctioned by the state (Al-Marashi, 2003; Baram, 1997; Bengio, 1998; Davis, 2005; Sassoon, 2012; Tripp, 2007). Against the backdrop of the Shi'a Islamic Revolution in Iran, it is possible to see how Saddam's preoccupation with his own political hegemony resulted in the ostracism and marginalisation of Iraqi Shi'is within Iraq as a result of their (alleged) sympathy for the newly-minted Iranian regime.[45] In Ba'thist discourse, this combination of political and historical factors led to the discursive construction of Iraqi Shi'is as potentially deviant, materially bolstered by the deportation of several thousand Iraqis of alleged "Iranian origin" (*taba'iyya Iraniyya*) over the border into Iran during the 1980s and 90s (Adib-Moghaddam, 2007; Cole, 2002; Davis, 2005; McLachlan and Joffé, 1984; Metz, 2004; Salbi, 2005).[46]

Ironically, many of the individuals deported into the Islamic Republic by the Ba'th regime on the grounds of being "Iranian" considered themselves to be Arab and Iraqi and therefore felt little affinity – beyond perhaps religious commonality – to the country in which they found themselves.[47] For this reason, rather than simply "returning" Iranians living in Iraq to their "home" in Iran, as Saddam Hussain possibly thought, the deportations of the 1980s thus resulted in uprooting significant numbers of self-

[45] The systematic persecution of Iraqi Shi'is marked a culmination of many years of Ba'thist tactics of displacement and control employed against various populations deemed to be a "threat" to the Ba'thist national cause (the Kurds, for example, were continually displaced and persecuted throughout the Ba'th regime, climaxing in the 1988 *Anfal*, which involved the mass extermination of Kurdish villages in northern Iraq).

[46] Estimates of the number of Iraqis deported during this period vary widely, from as low as 15,000 (Batatu, 1981) to as high as 300,000 (Interview 4). A significant number of (Shi'a) Faili Kurds were also deported during this period. The history of the Failis differs significantly from that of Arab Shi'a in Iraq, and for this reason they do not form part of the focus of this study.

[47] Indeed, as a number of studies have highlighted (Alshamary, 2013; Baram, 1981; Batatu, 1981; Cole, 2002; Dabashi, 2011a; Faleh, 2003; Haddad, 2011; Marr, 1985; Nakash, 2003a, 2003b; Nasr, 2004), Iraqi Shi'ism has historically been qualitatively different to its Iranian counterpart, most significantly when it comes to the differences in nationalistic identifications of Iraqi and Iranian Shi'is.

identifying *Iraqi*-Shi'is and dispersing them along the border of a foreign and alien country. In the context of the war, Iranian state propaganda against Arabs was as vociferous as Ba'thist discourse against Iran, and as a result, many deportees made all attempts possible to flee, often by way of Syria, with a significant proportion eventually settling in the UK. [48]

The historical and political context of the Iraqi Ba'thist state in the latter part of the twentieth century thus laid both the material and discursive groundwork for the emergence of a sectarianised Iraqi-Shi'a diasporic subject – both as result of the physical expulsion of Shi'is from the Iraqi nation-state and of the discursive othering of Shi'ism as "Iranian" and "non-Iraqi" by definition. For first-generation diasporans grappling with the material, psychic, and emotional effects of exile, these combined factors plausibly led to the emergence of a narrative of victimhood and marginalisation that justified their expulsion from Iraq on sectarian grounds. Unable to lay claim to either the (Arab/Sunni) "Iraqi" identity constructed by the Ba'th or the "Iranian" ethno-national identity they were accused of, individuals seeking to identify with their country of origin were required to find other explanations for their physical and discursive rejection by the Iraqi state under Saddam; the most obvious candidate being their status as Shi'a Muslims, which had precipitated such rejection in the first place. As one interviewee explained:

> There were so many [deportees who] have no relatives in Iran, they have no relation to Iran, they don't speak the language, they don't know any language other than Iraqi [Arabic]; but [the Iraqi government] accuse [them] of being

[48] Although a number of Iraqis, especially those lacking the funds or contacts to leave, remained in Iran, some stranded in refugee camps on the border for several years. However, there are no reliable figures available for the numbers of deportees who stayed in Iran versus those who left, or even for the proportion of Shi'is who were directly deported and those who fled from fear of deportation. For this reason, this study must necessarily take a qualitative and not quantitative perspective of the types of political subjectivity engendered by such processes, in order to tie them to contemporary forms of political engagement and mobilisation.

> Iranian. But we found out by experience [that] actually the choice was the *Shi'a* who were being accused of being Iranian by the rulers. That's what they were after, the Shi'a. They suspect that they may side with Iran when the war comes… Definitely it was sectarian. The government [was] targeting the Shi'a sect… It was ethnic cleansing. (Interview 4)[49]

In this sense, the cumulative effect of Ba'thist discourse intent on casting the deportees as "Iranian" and "other", and the deportees' contrary insistence that "we are not Iranian"[50] served to construct the Iraqi-Shi'a diasporic subject during the late twentieth century as a) politically invested in opposition to the Ba'thist regime, and b) affectively invested in a sense of victimhood and persecution predicated on identification with (either secular or religious) forms of Shi'a belonging. Rather than simply ridding itself of rogue elements, as Saddam possibly thought, I would like to suggest that the Ba'thist regime's deportation of Shi'is "of Iranian origin" instead produced a discursive rupture in diasporic Iraqis' own subjective understandings of themselves; thus paving the way for the formation of new, sectarianised forms of attachment to the homeland of "Iraq" within the diasporic space (since if they couldn't claim to be "Iraqi" in the same sense as that defined by the Ba'th regime, they had to seek alternative ways to claim both their national and religious belongings).

While it remains possible for individuals within the diaspora to identify with either the identity category of "Iraqi" and "Shi'a" in multiple and shifting ways, the political context of Iraqi state- and nation-building practices throughout the late twentieth century laid the groundwork for the discursive emergence of a hybridised and Iraqi-Shi'a subject in

[49] It should be noted here that there is no concrete evidence to suggest the Ba'th regime intentionally targeted Shi'is for ideological reasons, but rather the deportations were more likely than not a result of the state's desire to rid itself of elements it deemed a potential threat to its rule.

[50] A sentiment I encountered repeatedly during the course of my fieldwork – even among Iraqis whose family had historical ties to Iran and spoke Persian as a second language.

which notions of "Iraqiness" were rendered politically and discursively problematic in relation to notions of "Shi'aness". For this reason, it would seem that the enduring legacy of the Ba'thist regime in classifying Iraqi Shi'is as *taba'iyya*, and therefore Iranian and non-Arab by association, has been subsumed into diasporic fantasies and imaginaries of what it means to be "Iraqi" or "Shi'a" that have coalesced to produce a diasporic Iraqi-Shi'a subject in which sectarian forms of belonging and identification have become increasingly salient. Indeed, despite the scholarly consensus that the Ba'th regime was not ideologically sectarian, the vast majority of my research participants produced narratives that explicitly condemned the Ba'th for their persecution of Shi'is along sectarian lines.

The Ba'th regime under Saddam Hussain thus engaged in a number of material and discursive practices that led to the alienation and exclusion of Iraqi Shi'is from the Iraqi state- and nation-building project and whose enduring legacy was to physically and psychically produce the Iraqi-Shi'a diasporic subject as a discursive construction explicitly opposed to Ba'thist understandings of the identity categories of both "Shi'a" and "Iraqi" – and the presumed mutual exclusion between the two. This is not to say that only one particular formulation of the Iraqi diasporic subject was produced by such practices, but rather that the discursive and political significance of simultaneously asserting an Iraqi *and* a Shi'a identity was made problematic as a result of the Ba'thist regime's attempt to forcefully and violently separate these two categories of identification.

This transition from Iraqi ethno-nationalism to Shi'a politico-religious sectarianism that plausibly began with the forcible expulsion of Iraqi Shi'is under Saddam, has further been augmented by the contemporary political context of civil war and sectarian violence that continues to plague the current Iraqi nation-state. In particular, the 2003 US-led invasion

created a significant rupture with the romanticised and nostalgic "Iraq" of exile and led to the birth of a new "Iraq"; the Iraq of symbolic and material violence, coupled with a sense of Shi'a "resurgence" (Cole, 2002; Nasr, 2004, 2007; Walker, 2006). It is to the symbolic significance of this new, violent, sectarianised Iraq that I now turn.

From Saddam to Sadr: Iraq, Interrupted

While an emerging attachment to (religious or secular) Shi'a forms of belonging in the diasporic space arguably resulted from the discursive and physical ostracism of Iraqis "of Iranian origin", pre-2003 there was a significant extent to which diasporic Iraqis' assertions of their religious affiliation were inextricably tied to their sense of national belonging – hence the hybridised formulation "Iraqi-Shi'a". One interviewee summarised this feeling when describing the lack of integration by Iraqis into wider British society: "We thought we would go back; that Saddam would fall and we could go home".[51] Indeed, the epicentre for Iraqi opposition politics throughout the 1980s and 90s was located in London, with a number of prominent figures going on to form part of the post-2003 Iraqi government. As prominent Iraqi activist Kanan Makiya noted ruefully: "It's amazing how many of the political class in Iraq hold British passports" (Interview 1).

Such enduring nationalistic attachments to Iraq are typical of first-generation diasporans, who tend to romanticise the place of origin as a lost homeland and mobilise around idealised visions of the home state (Adamson, 2008; Acton, 1862; Axel, 2001; Boyarin, 1993; Brah, 1996; Brubaker, 2005; Hall, 1990; Koinova, 2009; Said, 2001; Werbner, 2002; among others). The US-led invasion of 2003, therefore, precipitated a rupture for Iraqi Shi'is in the diaspora who, on the one hand, cultivated nostalgic attachments to Iraq as a lost homeland and, on the other, saw the political vacuum left

[51] Interview 23.

by the overthrow of Saddam Hussain as an opportunity to promote a "Shi'a vision" of Iraq as a counter to decades of Sunni-dominated rule. In this sense, the political and social fallout of the 2003 invasion and ensuing civil conflict abruptly shattered both the diasporic political projects aimed at mobilising against the Saddam regime (thus opening up space for a more "Shi'a" political vision of Iraq) and the romanticised vision of Iraq harboured in the diasporic imaginary – sustained in part by diasporans' limited or no access to the country, aided by an international media blackout[52] and a nostalgic longing for the past. As one young British-born Iraqi Shi'i reflected:

> That's why 2003 was such a big deal. Because up until then Iraq was very much a myth. It was almost like a black hole that people talked about but that you never really knew whether or not it existed. I grew up with stories about Iraq, and all these memories and this nostalgia. But then in 2003 it became a reality. I remember at the beginning there was all this talk about Iraq becoming the next Dubai in 10 years, of Starbucks in Najaf – and then the shit hit the fan, if you'll excuse my language. (Interview 10)

For many diasporic Iraqis, 2003 thus represented a watershed moment in which their previous conception of their relationship to and understanding of their country of origin (the "myth" of Iraq identified by the above participant) was suddenly and violently challenged in ways that unsettled the boundaries of the Iraqi-Shi'a subject and precipitated a movement away from Iraqi nationalistic identifications and towards more explicitly sectarianised forms of belonging (whether symbolically or through active political participation and mobilisation). Much of the blurring of these categories of identification, and the ensuing politicisation and sectarianisation of the Iraqi-Shi'a diasporic subject, I would like to suggest, is a result of the psychic and political rupture

[52] With the notable exception of the 1991 Gulf War.

precipitated by the 2003 invasion and the consequences this had on the subjective fantasies sustained in the diasporic imaginary. Moreover, 2003 also resulted in the physical and material, as well as psychic, rupturing of the diasporic imaginary, whereby many or the more prominent diaspora political and social figures took the opportunity to return to Iraq to be part of the transitional political process there. As one interviewee put it: "All the [Iraqis] who became political and active returned [after 2003]. What is left here now is a hollow shell" (Interview 1).

Shattering the Myth of "Iraq"

If the Iraqi-Shi'a diasporic subject of the 1980s and 90s was characterised in political terms by opposition to the Saddam regime and an orientation towards (secular or religious) forms of Shi'a identification, it was characterised emotionally and affectively by nostalgia for a lost homeland and longing for return to the land of exile. In the words of Zainab Saleh, for exiled Iraqis, "the space [of diaspora] is that of nostalgia – nostalgia for an imagined place (Iraq), for an imagined time (the golden age of the 1950s) and/or imagined experience (that of Iraqis who lived during that golden age)" (Saleh, 2011: 231). Indeed, numerous studies have highlighted the prominence of nostalgia for the homeland and the desire for return in the experience of first-generation diasporic Iraqis living abroad (often tempered with quasi-mythological references to ancient Iraq through invocations of the civilisations of Mesopotamia, Babylon, Sumeria, and Assyria) (al-Ali, 2007; al-Khalifa, 2003; Alkhairo, 2008; al-Rasheed, 2004; Flynn, 2013; Jones-Gailani, 2014; Kubba, 2003; Salbi, 2005; Saleh, 2011; Witteborn, 2008). Consider the following account from an Iraqi woman forced to leave as a young girl:

> I can still picture every corner of our house in Najaf… When I first came to the UK I had this recurring dream that I was with my cousins [in Iraq], and I told

them: "It's not a dream anymore, we're back." But then I opened my eyes and I saw we're still here [in London]. (Interview 8)

Iraq here is imbued with an imaginary quality; both in the literal sense of the word through its appearance in a dream and in the Lacanian sense through its implicit equation with the Imaginary as represented by the originary myth of childhood innocence. But this idealistic and utopian fantasy projected by Iraqis in the diaspora was permanently and violently disrupted in 2003 when exiled Iraqis were finally able to return to the land of their birth only to discover a country ravaged by decades of dictatorship, war, violence, sanctions and insurgency. As one interviewee put it: "Iraq used to be the bride of the *khaleej* [Gulf]; now it is *zubala* [rubbish]". Post-2003, the thwarted desire for the lost homeland thus produced a psychic rupturing between previous identifications with "Iraq" as the land of exile and (be)longing and contemporary politically-charged vision of "Iraq" as a desolate war-zone tied up with notions of sectarianism, insurgency, violence, and invasion. The vast majority of Iraqi Shi'is exiled in the 1980s and 90s found, post-2003, that they no longer had any real sense of belonging to the Iraq they saw reflected in the television and satellite images dominating the 24-hour news cycle, and so resigned themselves to a life in diaspora (al-Ali, 2007; al-Khalifa, 2003; Alkhairo, 2008; al-Rasheed, 2004; Flynn, 2013; Kubba, 2003; Salbi, 2005; Saleh, 2011). Once the dream of return had been shattered the diasporic imaginary, previously a liminal space of exile and refuge, became a permanent space of resignation and adjustment.[53]

[53] There are no accurate figures pertaining to the number of Iraqis who remained in the UK post-2003; just as there are no accurate figures for the number of Iraqis in the UK as a whole. However, it should be noted that a number of politically active Iraqis, especially those involved in diasporic opposition movements such as the Iraqi National Congress, the Iraqi Democratic Union, the Iraqi National Front and the Iraqi National Accord, did indeed return to Iraq post-2003 – but since my focus in this thesis is on forms of subjectivity and identification engendered in the diaspora, the experiences of these individuals will not be delved into in any significant detail here.

Moreover, this sense of alienations from previous diasporic identifications with "Iraq" was further exacerbated by the sense of creeping political and social disillusionment following the events of 2003. As prominent Iraqi exile and statesman Adnan Pachachi writes in his memoir:

> The first thing that struck me on my return [in 2003] was the belief of many Iraqis, especially the young, that the US presence, even as an occupying power, would benefit Iraq… All those hopes and expectations soon disappeared, to be replaced by anger, frustration, and resentment. (Pachachi, 2013: 125–6)

While there are a number of factors that contributed to this sense of disillusionment, both amongst Iraqis in Iraq and exiles in the diaspora, the imposition of a new Iraqi government based on sectarian quotas arguably played a key role in, on the one hand, shattering any myth of a unified or coherent Iraq and, on the other, in the increasing sectarianisation of Iraqi political and social identity, both domestically and in the diaspora. As one of my interviewees put it: "Post-2003 sectarian identities have become more institutionalised… Iraq has been moving towards what some people have called the 'Lebanisation' of Iraqi politics. Iraqis became categorised through communal categories – so you had to be Sunni, or Kurd, or Shi'a; there was no other choice" (Interview 22).

In this sense, the psychic rupture precipitated by the 2003 invasion has led to a problematising of Iraqi diasporic identification; whereas prior to 2003 Iraqis in the diaspora were able to articulate their sense of "Iraqiness" – of their attachment to the subject constructed as "Iraqi" – in relation to the enduring fantasy of the lost homeland (often defined in opposition to the Ba'thification of Iraq under Saddam), post-2003 this fantasy could no longer be sustained, thus resulting in forms of diasporic identification in which the appellation of "Iraqiness" had no relationship to the contemporary

(sectarianised) reality of the Iraqi state and instead referred to this lost Iraq, the imaginary "Iraq" of exile (which had now "disappeared", as in the Al-Sayegh poem quoted at the beginning of this chapter). The rupture of 2003 thus precipitated a movement away from the hybridised Iraqi-Shi'a subject of the 1980s and 90s, and towards identificatory practices that took to heart the problematic association of "Iraqiness" with "Shi'aness" where one identity category was no longer able to stand in for the other. In this way, Iraqi Shi'is (whether within Iraq or in the diaspora) were increasingly required to identify with the category of "Shi'a"; whether as a way of aligning themselves with the post-2003 Shi'a-led government or as a way to gain social intelligibility within a discursive field that necessitated particular forms of ethno-religious categorisation.

Diaspora and Melancholia

The best way to understand this rupture between pre- and post-2003 forms of (be)longing and identification with the imagined homeland of Iraq, I would like to suggest, is through the psychoanalytic notion of melancholia. First outlined by Freud in his 1917 essay "Mourning and Melancholia", melancholia is distinguished from mourning by the ongoing unconscious attachment to the lost object. While mourning involves coming to terms with the loss of a real object (say, the death of a loved one), melancholia on the other hand involves the individual's rejection of the loss of an *unconscious* object, or rather, of the subjective fantasy attached to that object (Freud, 1994). In melancholia, while the individual may acknowledge the loss of the object itself, they are unable to acknowledge the loss of their unconscious attachment to that object – or rather, to the object of fantasy (in Lacanian terms, the *objet a*) – and thus continue to identify with that object even after it no longer exists. Melancholia thus represents a condition in which "the object relationship [is] shattered [but] the result [is] not the normal one of withdrawal of the libido from this object and a displacement onto a new

one, but something different… an *identification* of the ego with the abandoned object" (Freud, 1994: 249, original emphasis).

In Freudian terms, then, the psychic rupture caused by the 2003 invasion of Iraq produced exactly this kind of melancholic longing in which the object of fantasy (Iraq), which had previously been imbued with nostalgic longing, was disrupted by the reality of the political and social situation in the country in the wake of the US led intervention. In this sense, the vision of "Iraq" sustained in the diasporic imaginary (both in the literal and Lacanian senses of the term), and which formed the basis for diasporic forms of nationalistic attachment and identification, was abruptly and permanently lost. Of course, this imagined "Iraq" had never really existed in the first place, but the experience of exile and the lack of real information about the country during the Saddam era meant that the fantasy could thrive unchecked. Only in 2003 when the world's media turned its attention to Iraq and the country's borders were made passable for diasporans for the first time since the early 1980s was this fantasy abruptly confronted with the reality of its own fabrication. In other words, as long as Iraq remained inaccessible to Iraqis in exile – both in terms of physical access and in terms of material information emerging from the country – they were able to maintain their imaginary attachment to the "Iraq" of their rose-tinted memories. But when this fantasy was violently removed from them as a result of the 2003 invasion, rather than accepting the loss of the object of desire (the "Iraq" of their "dreams"), many diasporic Iraqis were simply unable to come to terms with this loss and instead maintained psychic attachments to "Iraq" through a mechanism of melancholia.

This melancholic attachment to the unattainable object of desire is reflected in the following song lyrics, written after the 2003 US-led invasion by a young Iraqi-born man whose family fled Iraq when he was just a baby:

I woke up when I was just a young boy,

And saw that life's not what it seems.

I realised long ago,

It's a dream within a dream.

I remember when father once held my hand,

Told me a story about a faraway land,

Land of hope, land of mystery,

The land I never got to see.

She cries, "son can you help me?

Your father, he abandoned me."

I weep, I'm just lost here,

I don't know where I'm meant to be.

They say: "Boy, don't loose your identity,

Remember who and what you're supposed to be,

Part of a distorted community

Of the land I never got to see.

She was once the endless beauty of time

Now… she's a dying rose

Lost her elegance, vibrancy, and charm,

Broken by life's endless blows.

Times of Babylon and the golden gate,

Wiped away by ravage and by hate.

Savaged throughout history,

The land I never got to see.[54]

These lyrics strongly evoke a sense of loss and longing that arguably came to define the experience of exile and displacement for many (though not all) Iraqis in the diaspora throughout the late twentieth century.[55] More than this, the poetic verses chart the diaspora's changing relationship with Iraq – from mythical place of origin ("land of hope, land of mystery"); to politically-fraught land of exile ("part of a distorted community"); to locus of identity ("remember who you are"); to disillusionment and betrayal ("broken by life's endless blows"). It is these last two orientations that speak most strongly of melancholic desire, especially in the enduring sense of longing and attachment to the lost homeland despite recognition that this homeland no longer exists in any real sense – as evoked in the repeated refrain of "the land I never got to see". According to Freud, melancholia does not just involve enduring attachment to and identification with the object of loss, it also involves a mechanism of self-punishment and self-criticism which occasionally takes on the form of a reproach directed at the lost object for having allowed itself to be lost in the first place (Freud, 1994).

In the case of Iraqi Shi'is in the diaspora, then, it can plausibly be argued that the melancholia produced by the rupture of 2003 has resulted in a simultaneous orientation *towards* and *away from* Iraq – towards "Iraq" as the object of fantasy and away from the reality of Iraq as the object of melancholia. In this sense, the psychic rupture precipitated by the 2003 invasion has led to a problematising of Iraqi diasporic identification; whereas prior to 2003 Iraqis in the diaspora were able to articulate their sense of "Iraqiness" – of their attachment to the subject constructed as "Iraqi" – in relation to the enduring fantasy of the lost homeland ("land of hope, land of mystery"), post 2003 this

[54] Excerpt of song lyrics by M. Madani. Source: author's fieldnotes.
[55] This is perhaps less true of those activists and political figures who went back after 2003 and became involved in domestic Iraqi politics.

fantasy could no longer be sustained without recourse to the problematic mechanism of melancholia, thus resulting in forms of diasporic identification in which the appellation of "Iraqiness" had no relationship to the contemporary reality of the Iraqi state and instead referred to this lost Iraq: "the land I never got to see". Interestingly, a few years after writing the lyrics quoted above, the same man travelled to Iraq and reported feeling a sense of dislocation and alienation on being confronted with the real-life manifestation of his object of desire: "I felt more Iraqi before I went to Iraq; now I don't know what I am."[56] In other words, the result of this melancholic attachment to Iraq as an object of fantasy was to produce forms of identification that directly conflicted with the reality of Iraq itself and instead worked to either sustain nostalgic fantasies of "Iraq" within the diasporic imaginary or to produce forms of identification that no longer took "Iraq" as their core constitutive formulation.

While the Freudian conception of melancholia illuminates the dual process of attachment and rejection invoked in diasporans' identifications with Iraq, Sara Kaplan (2007) draws on an alternative conceptualisation of melancholia to explain how melancholic attachments can undergird political orientations in the diasporic context. Contrary to Freud's understanding of melancholia as a form of individual psychosis, Kaplan puts forward a notion of melancholia that sees it "not as a private, backward-looking phenomenon of paralysing psychic conflict, but as an embodied individual and collective psychic practice with the political potential to transform grief into the articulation of grievances" (Kaplan, 2007: 513). Understood in this way, it is possible to see how melancholia can undergird the kinds of attachments and imaginaries that can be seen reflected in claims of in-group or out-group belonging and difference. In the case of Iraqi Shi'is in the diaspora, the melancholic attachment to "Iraq", coupled with a Shi'a-specific ethics of victimhood and marginalisation, can thus lead to forms of sectarianised

[56] Interview 5.

identity-claims mobilised for political gain – such as the returnees who sought to capitalise on the sectarian quotas imposed post-2003, for example.

From this perspective, diasporic melancholia doesn't just work to shape forms of psychic attachment and identification to the subject constructed as "Iraqi", it also undergirds political orientations towards Iraq as a homeland manifested as an "historically and geographically specific militant articulation of present and future political desires that is rooted in the unending mourning of the past" (Kaplan, 2007: 521). When this melancholic political orientation is combined with the experience of Shi'a religious and cultural practices in the diasporic space (explored in Chapter 2) – and in particular with the political salience of specifically Shi'a forms of identification as outlined in the first part of this chapter – it is possible to see how the mechanism of melancholia can lead to imbuing the Iraqi diasporic subject with an explicitly *Shi'a* politico-religious flavour. In this way, the mechanism of melancholia can be seen to undergird both forms of diasporic political mobilisation oriented towards Iraq *and* diasporic articulations of Shi'a-specific identity that are decreasingly tied to the political entity of the Iraqi state. Melancholia thus helps explain the differential orientations of diasporic Iraqi Shi'is towards Iraq, as well as the shift away from nationalistic towards sectarianised forms of identification that I am most interested in this thesis. This is all the more pertinent when considering the way in which religious and national forms of identification have become problematised through the experience of exile and diaspora as outlined above.

Iraq in Fragments: Violence and Religion post-2003

If 2003 represented a moment of rupture with regards to diasporic attachments to "Iraq", then it also represented a moment of rupture with the discursive content of the signifier "Iraq" as articulated in diasporic fantasies. Specifically, the rose-tinted vision of Iraq as a land of cosmopolitanism, where people of diverse races, religions, and creeds

were able to live in harmony with each other, was abruptly shattered in light of the flaring inter- and intra-communal violence that engulfed the country in the years following the invasion. I was struck by how many of my interviewees insisted that sectarianism in Iraq was nothing more than an American import, making claims such as that "before 2001 we never had even heard about something called Sunni or Shi'i" (Interview 6), or that "we didn't think in our generation about Sunni and Shi'i" (Interview 4). However, the fantasy of "Iraq" as a country of tolerance and opportunity that undergirded previous diasporic attachments and identifications was, in the harsh light of day, exposed as just that – a fantasy. Interestingly, such comments also seem to contradict some of the previous statements made by other interviewees, suggesting that there may be socio-economic or generational differences in the way in which different Iraqis experienced and negotiated issues such as sect on a daily basis. On the other hand, it is also possible that such claims towards an *a*sectarian past are equally couched in nostalgia and fantasy, and serve as an attempt to gloss over the structurally and administratively sectarian nature of the Iraqi state under the Ba'th.

One of the most interesting facets of the psychic and discursive rupture created by 2003 and the years following it, was how it exposed for the first time the diverse attachments and fantasies that diasporans had been cultivating towards the "Iraq" of their desires; thus exposing the unconscious of the Iraqi diasporic subject. As one of my interviewees put it, reflecting on the high tempers that inevitably flared during any gathering of Iraqis in London: "it's almost as if my Iraq is not their Iraq";[57] while another interviewee referred to the "clash of ideologies" amongst diasporic Iraqis.[58] In other words, they all considered themselves "Iraqis", but the content and workings of that particular signifier

[57] Interview 23.
[58] Interview 19.

functioned differently for different people, a fact that was only brought to light once such fantasies were confronted with the reality of post-war Iraq.

This notion of individual Iraqis harbouring different visions of and attachments to "Iraq" is certainly not unusual; one of the constants of any discursive identity construction is its inherent internal instability and incoherence. However, as explored above, prior to 2003 diasporans were able to mostly gloss over such internal divisions due to the shared trauma of exile and the cultivation of a phantasmatic attachment to the "Iraq" of memory (not the mention the impetus to construct a unified Iraqi identity provided by the various diasporic oppositional political organisations – though this itself was highly problematic). Only when faced with the violent reality of post-2003 Iraq were such internal rifts – what Lacan would term the unconscious of the nationalistic Iraqi diasporic subject – thrown into sharp relief. In this sense, 2003 marked a shift towards the fragmentation of Iraqi(-Shi'a) diasporic identity, where diasporans' differing visions and fantasies of "Iraq" suddenly took on political significance in light of the events unfolding within the country itself. Of course, it would be an overstatement to suggest that the salience of ethnic and sectarian identity categories only really came to the surface in the wake of the 2003 invasion (even if that is the narrative that many diasporans would have us believe). Rather, the rupture created by 2003 threw into sharp relief the underlying processes that had already been shaping a politicised and ethno-sectarian Iraqi-Shi'a subject in the diasporic setting through the mechanisms of trauma, abjection, melancholia, haunting, fantasy, and identification explored throughout this thesis.

One example of the way in which the fragmentation of Iraqi ethno-national identity came to be inscribed with a political logic of violence and exclusionism is the various attachments fostered by sectarian insurgency and civil war of 2006-8. Although the war

took place within the geographical confines of Iraq itself, its repercussions were felt widely, including in the diaspora. Space limitations prevent me from going into an in-depth analysis of the various insurgent groups and currents operating within Iraq at that time, but suffice it to say that from the relative safety of diasporic London, a significant number of the Iraqis I interviewed felt that the violence cemented their feeling of being "Shi'a", either as a besieged and victimised group or in opposition to the radical politics of prominent Shi'a figures such as Muqtada al-Sadr (Interviews 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 18, 19, and 27). One young British-born man, for example, offered the following analysis:

> This guy [Muqtada al-Sadr], he's a gangster… He's Jabba the Hutt; he's the gangster in Star Wars, he's the big, fat, ugly slug… the intergalactic gangster… Which is the biggest problem. This is the thing that people don't understand. Is the Western media are *loving* it. All of this *fitna*[59] that's happening, it's because of Western media portrayal… 'Cos they would never put you a cool Shi'i scholar saying something nice – no, they put you one of these dirty old farts or crazy people saying something atrocious, [to] get the Sunni blood boiling. And when they wanna [sic] put on a Sunni, they'll put one of these crazy people who are war-hungry, and this is it. This is what sells. And it's… this is why UKIP is getting stronger, this is why the BNP is getting stronger. But even the BNP see the truth is hard to keep away from people… [Even] Nick Griffin. He's like: "I went to Syria, I went to the Middle East, I came back, and I realise the problem is these extreme Sunni people. The Shi'is don't have anything to do with it, they don't give a shit about any of that stuff and mostly people here are actually pretty chilled." And it's true. All of us, when England play, we put on our England shirts

[59] The Arabic word *fitna* comes from a verbal root meaning "to tempt, seduce, or lure" and is a significant concept in Islam mostly used to refer to a state of moral or civil strife (usually conceived of as an act of sedition against the will of God).

> and support England, do you know what I mean? These guys, these Sunni people, they want to create an Islamic state here. That's something you need to understand. (Interview 6)

What emerges from the above quote, despite the vocal hatred and disdain for Muqtada al-Sadr, is a strong sense of Shi'a victimhood and self-righteousness, as well as a disregard for Sunni ethno-religious sentiment and/or political objectives. In the narrative presented here, Sunnis/Salafis are unproblematically constructed as "other" ("these guys") while ordinary Shi'is ("all of us") are cast as the victims, both as a material effect of Sunni violence and as a symbolic effect of Shi'a retaliation in the form of al-Sadr's Mehdi Army. It is also interesting to see how the interviewee draws links between the communal violence in Iraq and a sense of rising xenophobia and Islamophobia in Britain (implicit in the references to UKIP and the BNP) – both of which he constructs in opposition to the interests of Shi'a minorities ("the Shi'is don't have anything to do with it"). Here, the man is implicitly staking a claim for a particular kind of Shi'a identity (that notably doesn't include prominent Shi'a figures such as Muqtada al-Sadr), one that is constructed as passive victim in the face of Sunni aggression and populist xenophobia.

The above quote is just one example of how the communal violence taking place within Iraq in the years post-2003 became inscribed with a narrative of Shi'a victimhood and suffering that arguably has its roots in the emancipatory logic of the Karbala Paradigm (as explored in Chapter 2). Of course, it is difficult to know how representative the thoughts and narratives of this one particular individual are when it comes to the experience of diasporic Iraqi Shi'is as a demographic group,[60] but in discursive terms it

[60] It should be reiterated at this juncture that the aim of this thesis is not to offer a representative overview of an essentialised Iraqi-Shi'a "identity" as encountered in the diasporic context, but rather to explore one particular articulation of that identity construction and trace the discursive shift that has led to what I am calling the "sectarianisation" of the Iraqi-Shi'a subject as experienced through the ideological apparatus of neocapitalism.

is possible to see how events in Iraq came to inform diasporic attachments to both the symbolic signifier "Iraq" and the identity construction "Shi'a". In this sense, the violent sectarianism in Iraq itself contributed to a discursive construction of both "Iraqi" and "Shi'a" identity within the diaspora that was no longer able to accommodate the hybridisation of previous years. Indeed, the siege mentality cultivated by diasporic Iraqi Shi'is in relation to the violence in Iraq arguably led to the splitting of nationalistic and ethno-religious identity categories in which it no longer made sense to claim to be both "Iraqi" *and* "Shi'a" – the lines had already been violently drawn, and sides had to be chosen.

As well as cementing and institutionalising sectarian divisions within Iraq itself, there was an extent to which post-2003 Iraqi domestic politics had an impact on the discursive construction of what it meant to be "Shi'a" along ethno-sectarian lines. For example, one interviewee remarked how when encountering Iraqis from Sunni backgrounds in London there was often a sense of antagonism resulting from their conflicting narratives of what it meant to be Iraqi: "Sunnis would say that the Shi'a [government] had ruined Iraq, but under Saddam things were much worse for the Shi'a" (Interview 5). The political and social divisions within Iraq thus fostered alternative and competing stories about which group held the most power that coupled with the Shi'a experience of exile and displacement during the 1980s and 90s, fomented an enduring sense of Shi'a victimhood and misunderstanding that was further compounded by the sectarian violence of the 2006-2008 civil conflict.

If the political and social currents underlying the discursive shift away from an *Iraqi*(-Shi'a) diasporic subject and towards an (Iraqi-)*Shi'a* diasporic subject (i.e. away from nationalist and towards ethno-religious identity categories) had been fomenting for years through the experience of exile, trauma, loss, nostalgia, melancholia, and

victimhood, the discursive and psychic rupture of 2003 and the ensuing violent institutionalisation of sectarian identities within Iraq itself thus proved to be the tipping point for the fracturing of the Iraqi-Shi'a subject within the diasporic imaginary. Just as Iraq itself fragmented along ethno-sectarian lines, where decades of political tyranny and suppressed resentment boiled over into violent anger at the "other", so too the Iraqi-Shi'a diasporic subject became trapped in a discursive fracturing in which the two constitutive elements of the identity category as previously constructed were placed in violent and oppositional conflict with each other. For Iraqi Shi'is in the diaspora, their sense of "Iraqiness", which had previously served as a reactionary identity against the othering discourse of the Ba'thist regime, was no longer politically salient in the post-2003 climate of sectarianism and violence, and thus became further tempered – if not eclipsed – by a solidifying sense of "Shi'aness" as a contra to Sunni violence.

This is not to claim that all Iraqi Shi'is in the diaspora turned away from their national roots and towards an exclusionist and sectarian Shi'a identity – of course, the reality is far more nuanced – but from a discursive perspective it is possible to trace the lines in the sand as it became less and less salient for individuals to articulate identifications with the "Iraq" of nostalgia and memory and, against the background of political and social sectarianisation in Iraq, made increasing sense to present versions of "Shi'ism" and "Shi'aness" invested with the trauma and suffering of targeted minorities in Iraq. In this way, the socio-symbolic system constructed by the various power structures operating within both Iraq and the diaspora during the latter part of the twentieth century worked to produce particular iterations of the Iraqi-Shi'a subject where the conflict between the "Iraq" of fantasy and the Iraq of reality cultivated increased orientations towards a discursively-constructed "Shi'aness" that did not, on the surface, harbour the same problems and fractures as the identity category "Iraqi".

While this is almost certainly a trend that took place over time, the violent explosion of ISIS on the scene in 2014, coupled with a political climate of rising Islamophobia and xenophobia in the UK and Europe as a whole (as highlighted in the above interview quote), certainly accelerated the process and led to the politicisation of an emerging *Shi'a* diasporic subject. This is something I turn to later in the thesis, but first I want to briefly explore the geographic element to the fracturing of Iraqi ethno-national identity in the tumultuous years post-2003. Specifically, it is my contention that the opening up of Iraq's borders coupled with the violence and danger of travelling to Baghdad and northern regions resulted both in the physical and territorial partitioning of the country along ethno-sectarian lines, but also came to shape the kinds of affective and material ties available to diasporic Iraqis with regards to their "home" country that worked to shape particular iterations of what it meant to be "Shi'a" in relation to the political, social, and material reality of Iraq of post-2003.

Sectarianised Geographies: Towards a "Shi'a Iraq"

By the time Saddam Hussain was overthrown in 2003, the vast majority of Iraqi Shi'is exiled in the UK had not set foot on the soil of their home country for the best part of 30 years. Due to the political and politicised nature of the Iraqi Shi'a diaspora, in which individuals either fled or were forcibly expelled from Iraq due to their political and/or religious beliefs, most Iraqi Shi'is who came to settle in London had had little or no contact with Iraq itself since the moment of their exile. Many even went on to naturalise as British citizens following the expiration or annulment of their Iraqi documents. With no Iraqi documents, it was near impossible for exiled Iraqis to travel back to their home country during the years of international sanctions when Iraq effectively sealed itself off from the outside world. One middle-aged woman, for example, who left following the arrest of her brother for his involvement with the (Shi'a) Islamic Da'wa Party, didn't hear from her family in Iraq for almost 20 years (it later emerged her brother had died in

prison).[61] Following the US-led invasion and the reopening of Iraq's borders, diasporans were finally able to see the country they had been dreaming about for so long – but the Iraq they found was not the Iraq they had left behind.

While 2003 represented a watershed moment for first-generation diasporans finally able to travel "home" after decades in exile, for the second and third generation of Iraqi Shi'is born in the UK, 2003 was the first time they were able to see the country of their parents' and grandparents' memories with their own eyes. The reality of post-2003 Iraq however, ravaged by decades of sanctions and torn apart by a brutal civil war where rival sectarian militias battled for political and social dominance, did not match up to the rosy vision they had been led to expect. Moreover the violence and instability within Iraq itself meant that certain parts of the country remained off-limits to returning exiles, especially those from Shi'a backgrounds. For this reason, many Iraqi Shi'is returning to Iraq found themselves limited to travelling within Shi'a majority areas as an attempt to protect themselves from the rising sectarian violence within the country. As one second-generation young woman noted:

> When we go to Iraq, I only ever spend my time going between the houses of different family members in Baghdad since it's not safe to go other places. Only in Najaf and Karbala can we actually go out and walk around on the streets – it's safe because they're Shi'a areas and no one will attack us.[62]

In this way, and especially for second- and third-generation diasporans, any direct understanding of "Iraq" as a geographical entity has become fragmented into distinct areas and enclaves categorised according to sectarian affiliation. Indeed, this fracturing

[61] Informal conversation with Um Z.
[62] Informal conversation with K, June 2015.

of any sense of a unified Iraq within the diasporic imaginary is reflective of structural patterns of power and control operating contemporaneously within Iraqi territory itself – from the "Sunni triangle" of Anbar province to the "Shi'a enclaves" of the southern shrine cities; each controlled by political and religious actors operating independently from each other (and often from the government). During the peak of the civil conflict in 2006-2008, in particular, it became almost impossible for individuals of one sect to move freely or safely in areas controlled by power groups operating under a different sectarian banner. In this sense, Iraq post-2003 became geographically, as well as ideologically divided, in which fiercely-guarded territorial lines were drawn to distinguish the domain of one sectarian militia from the next; with the Shi'a dominating the south, the Kurds claiming the north, and the Sunnis ruling areas of Mosul, Tikrit, and the central provinces (Cockburn, 2008; Damluji, 2010; Dodge, 2014; Haddad, 2014; Ismael and Fuller, 2009; Visser, 2010; Yousif, 2010). Such geographical divisions within Iraq have persisted both materially and affectively – one interviewee described how the Iraqi army were not welcome in Sunni-majority areas because they were often seen as nothing but glorified Shi'a militia backed by the Iraqi and Iranian governments:

> Some people say that the Iraqi army and government is sectarian and that it's controlled by the Shi'a. So when the army goes into a Sunni village with a *Ya Hussain* flag draped on one of their tanks, it's easy to see how it gets seen as a sectarian thing. Some Shi'a might say, "Yes, finally. we're on top!", but… a Sunni person in that village might see the flag and think it represents Shi'a revenge – that they want revenge for what happened to the Alhululbayt and also for what happened to them under Saddam. But for a Shi'a soldier they might have simply brought the flag as a good luck charm. So there's a lack of communication and trust. (Interview 9)

Such geographical and territorial divisions are further compounded by the significance of the southern Shi'a shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala, both of which serve as seats of Shi'a pedagogical and theological power as well as representing two of the holiest pilgrimage sites for Shi'a Muslims around the world (not to mention the operational headquarters of a number of significant Shi'a militias during the height of the sectarian violence). Karbala, in particular, also holds spiritual and affective resonance for practicing Shi'is as the location of the Battle of Karbala and the mythological birthplace of ritualised Shi'a Islam (Cole, 2002; Dabashi, 2011; Shanneik, 2015). Since the Saddam-era ban on Shi'a religious practice was lifted in 2003, the annual 'Ashura and Arba'een commemorations in Iraq have attracted millions of Shi'is from around the world, and represent some of the largest global pilgrimage events annually.[63] Conversely, Najaf represents the seat of Shi'a theological scholarship and is home to the highest-ranking Shi'a scholar, Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani. Najaf is also the home of the mausoleum of Imam Ali, who Shi'is believe to be the rightful successor to the Prophet Muhammad.

Both Najaf and Karbala thus form part of a global pilgrimage network of Shi'a shrines that work to shape the affective, emotional, and politico-religious contours of what it means to "be Shi'a" in any given historical moment. As Zaidi explains:

> [T]hese shrines emerged as important spaces and sites onto which competing claims of authentic authority and ideology were played out. For shrine authorities, religious scholars and students, pilgrims, merchants, and activists, the shrines provide a window into the distinct ways that sectarianism was

[63] Estimates of the number of Shi'a pilgrims vary; however, in 2014 the Iraqi government issued a statement saying that more than 17 million Shi'is had participated in the Arba'een pilgrimage over a period of 40 days – with at least a million coming from Iran alone. Source: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-30462820, accessed 4 August 2017.

produced and the range of practices that constituted "being Shi'a". (Zaidi, 2015: 5)

It is within this context that it is possible for a third-generation British Shi'i of Pakistani origin to upload a picture of herself in Najaf to Facebook accompanied by the words: "Home is where the heart is" ("home" in this case being used in a spiritual and affective, rather than literal sense). It is because of the emotional and symbolic significance of (southern) Iraq for Shi'ism that it makes sense for Shi'is of all national and ethnic backgrounds to feel affiliation to Iraq as the birthplace and "home" of Shi'a Islam. "Iraq", in this iteration, is no longer a territorial nation-state evocative of national and ethnic belonging, but a transcendent space of spiritual and affective Shi'a belonging as represented by the southern shrine cities.

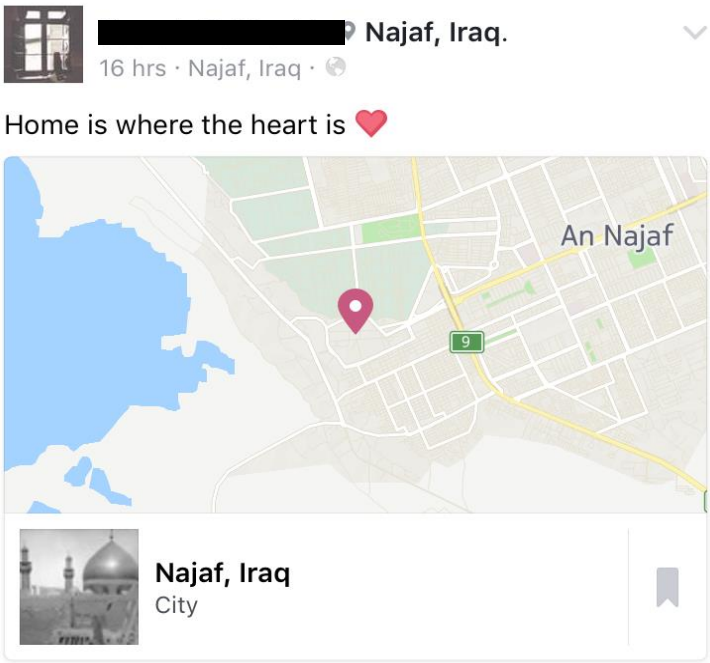

Fig. 1 – Facebook post by SB on on 14 November 2016 (Source: Author's fieldwork)

This orientation away from Iraqi nationalism and towards a "Shi'a Iraq" is also exemplified by the following image, which was sent to me by a second-generation Iraqi Shi'i in early 2015:

Fig. 2 – Map of Iraq superimposed with quote by Imam Ali shared via Whatsapp on 17 Feb 2015. (Source: Author's fieldwork)

Here, a map of Iraq is superimposed with a quote by Imam Ali declaring the country "the residence of our Shi'a". Interestingly, no background or context is provided for the quote itself (I myself was unable to track down the source); rather, the repeated iteration of the word "our" juxtaposed with the image of Iraq as a geographical entity (inclusive of Iraqi Kurdistan) works to gloss over all other iterations of "Iraq" and reduce the territorial state to a single sectarian essence. Rather than paying attention to the complex ethno-religious politics operating within Iraq, the image functions as a mythologised ideal whereby only one segment of the population is recognised and represented cartographically. Considering the fact I received this image in early 2015, during a period in which the Iraqi army was fighting to regain large swathes of territory from ISIS, the symbolic significance of this Shi'a vision of "Iraq" should not be understated, and ties into the the increasing sectarianisation of Iraqi political and civil society discussed earlier.

In both the examples above, the "Iraq" being claimed as the "home" and "residence" of Shi'a Islam (and by extension all practicing Shi'is, regardless of ethno-national origin) is qualitatively different from the "Iraq" of nostalgia and exile previously claimed by the first generation of Iraqi diasporans. Arguably, the transformation of "Iraq" as a place of national and ethnic belonging into "Shi'a Iraq" predicated on a politico-religious identity claim has been exacerbated by the experience of diaspora and exile, whereby Iraqi (and non-Iraqi) Shi'is living across the world are only able to safely visit areas of Iraq that are dominated by their co-religionists and thus considered "safe" (Zaidi, 2015). In this sense, the violent civil conflict of post-2003 Iraq not only led to the "sectarianisation" of Iraqi political and civil society (Haddad, 2014; Ismael and Fuller, 2009; Visser, 2007, 2010; Yousif, 2010), it also worked to carve up the urban and rural fabric of the country along sectarian lines in ways that have had enduring effects on the types of subjectivities available within the diasporic imaginary.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the various meanings and iterations of the signifier "Iraq" across time and space, and particularly how the experience of exile and displacement, coupled with the violent sectarian politics of Iraq itself post-2003, have shaped the kinds of identifications possible to Iraqi Shi'is in the diaspora. Fundamentally, it is my contention that the shifting meaning of "Iraq" within the diasporic imaginary – from the Iraq of memory and exile to the "Shi'a Iraq" of the southern shrine cities – is reflective of a wider identificatory shift away from nationalistic forms of belonging and towards a (transnational and pan-ethnic) conception of what it means to be "Shi'a".

In this sense, contemporary discursive articulations of Iraq as the spiritual "home" of Shi'a Islam have worked to claim a mythologised and politicsed "Iraq" as pertinent not just to Iraqis themselves, but to all practicing Shi'a Muslims. For this reason, the

orientation towards "Shi'a Iraq" within the diasporic imaginary can be seen to undergird the formation of the sectarianised diasporic Shi'a subject in which politico-religious forms of identification and belonging have greater resonance and power than any kind of ethno-national or state-based identity. This is especially true of second- and third-generation diasporans, whose experiences of Iraq are necessarily mediated firstly via the memories of their parents and grandparents, and secondly by the violent reality of negotiating a war-zone torn apart by ethnic and civil divisions.

While this chapter has focused on the ways in which ideas and identifications circulating around the signifier "Iraq" have been transformed by the diasporic experience, I have only briefly touched on the various iterations and manifestations of what it means to be "Shi'a" within the diasporic context. The following chapter seeks to rectify this lacuna, firstly by exploring the ways in which Shi'a politico-religious identity has developed over time and in relation to a number of significant political and historical developments, and secondly by charting the ways in which the enduring influence and power of the Shi'a religious establishment works to construct and sustain specific forms of Shi'a religious subjectivity in the diasporic context. The identity shift in orientations towards "Iraq" precipitated by the diasporic experience cannot be understood in isolation from a Shi'a-specific logic of victimhood and marginalisation cultivated both through the inscription of ritualised myth into politicised religious consciousness and the pedagogical instruction of Shi'a ethics through the shaping of the idealised pious Shi'a subject. It is only via an understanding of the specificities of Shi'a Islam as a religious sensibility and political orientation that the emergence of the sectarianised (Iraqi-)Shi'a diasporic subject is rendered intelligible.

Chapter 2 – Sayyids, Shrines, and Symbols: Shaping the (Sectarianised) Shi'a Subject

Introduction

The construction of identity, whether individual or collective, is necessarily a multifaceted and contingent process, encompassing a variety of discursive, political, and socio-economic factors. While the first chapter of this thesis focused on the changing content of the signifier "Iraq" within the diasporic imaginary productive of the (Iraqi-)Shi'a subject across time and space, this chapter is primarily preoccupied with the signification of what it means to be "Shi'a", and how this has been transformed in the diasporic context to become the basis of an emergent political identity.

Simultaneously functioning as an aesthetic register of religious ritual and a political alignment towards collective action, Shi'ism as a philosophical doctrine and producer of religiously-inflected subjects involves the intersection of transnational religious authority with local and politically-embedded practices of religious observance. To be "Shi'a" in the sense of articulating a visible commitment to religious doctrine means, at least momentarily, to align with a particular subject position or identity category that can be recognisably differentiated from other forms of religious and/or political orientation; one that is invested at once with the directive of an overarching transnational network of clerics and scholars and with the particularities and minutiae of daily lived experience and religious practice. Within the context of diasporic London, the changing nature of what it means to be "Shi'a" also takes place within a socio-political milieu in which attitudes towards Islam and Muslims themselves have been shaped by the contemporary sectarian politics of conflicts in the Middle East and elsewhere.

The shift away from nationalistic identifications with the symbolic signifier "Iraq" and towards ethno-sectarian iterations of politico-religious belonging outlined in Chapter 1 is further augmented in this chapter through a detailed study of the way in which the categories "Shi'a" and "Shi'ism" function in the contemporary diasporic imaginary in ways that are productive of the sectarianised Shi'a subject under investigation. Primarily, it is my contention that the inscription of contemporary political antagonisms onto the identity category "Shi'a" – a category already heavily imbued with politico-religious significance as a result of the intersection between transnational clerical authority and the politicisation of Shi'a religious mythology throughout the latter part of the twentieth-century – has led to the emergence of a sectarianised Shi'a subject within the diasporic imaginary. In particular, the emphasis here is on the historical development of a politically-inflected Shi'a discursive ethics founded on victimhood and emancipation and its transformation in the contemporary moment through the rise of militant Sunni groups such as Islamic State (ISIS).

The first part of this chapter focuses on the transnational nature of Shi'ism through a study of the religious and political authority of the clerical establishment in Iraq and Iran. In particular, I seek to draw out the ways in which the intersection of Shi'a clerical authority with enduring transnational religious and political networks has contributed to the formation of an idealised Shi'a subject embedded in networks of scholarly influence and patronage and shaped by the discursive forces of Shi'a theology as narrowly defined and practiced by the religious establishment. Part of this project involves scrutinising the influence of the Islamic Republic of Iran in producing certain narratives and discourses regarding what it means to be "Shi'a" in the contemporary world – and how such discourses are challenged or tempered in the diasporic context. In this sense, the symbolic and material authority of the Shi'a clerical establishment, transnational religious networks, and the Iranian regime can be seen as productive of

the discursive contours that foster attachments to a pious and idealised Shi'a subject – attachments that have come to inform (but not entirely determine) the kinds of identifications and subject-positions available to (Iraqi) Shi'is in the diaspora.

Having thus examined the institutional and material networks productive of certain kinds of Shi'a subjectivity, I turn to the symbolic and aesthetic registers of Shi'ism as a system of ritual practice in order to contextualise the transformation of Shi'ism from a mythological and ritualistic repertoire into a performative iteration of political emancipation. In particular, I emphasise the ways in which the historical context of the late twentieth century, including the rise of politicised Shi'ism in Iraq and the wider Arab world and the significance of the Shi'a Islamic revolution in Iran, laid the groundwork for a politically-inflected Shi'a aesthetics of ritual that emphasised the ethical imperative to "be Shi'a" as a category of belonging and practice predicated on a politics of victimhood and emancipation. This, in turn, has been further augmented by recent developments both as a result of rising sectarianism in the Middle East and the resulting socio-political climate in the UK.

Finally, I turn to the contemporary moment in order to explore the ways in which the symbol of "ISIS" functions as an empty signifier in the (Iraqi-)Shi'a diasporic imaginary and lies at the constitutive heart of a contemporary ideological attachment to a Shi'a ethics of sectarianism. It is ISIS, or rather the symbolic signifier "ISIS" understood as the ultimate force of "evil" – the final incarnation of the brutality of sectarian violence – that represents the suturing point between Shi'a politico-religious discourses of victimhood and persecution and Western media discourses of barbarism and depravity; and that thus serves as the Lacanian empty signifier around which a Shi'a ideology of ethical sectarianism has begun to coalesce within the diasporic context.

Clerical Authority: Towards a Transnational Shi'a Subject

The Shi'a *'ulama* (derived from the Arabic word *'ilm*, meaning "knowledge"; sing. *'alim*) are a transnational community of scholars trained in theology and jurisprudence in the Shi'a religious seminaries known as *hawzas* (from the Arabic *hawza 'ilmiyya* meaning "the territory of knowledge"), the most prestigious of which are located in the shrine cities of Iraq and Iran.[64] As well as being qualified scholars and practitioners, the *'ulama* derive their authority from their status as interpreters of divine law. According to Twelver Shi'ism, only the twelve Imams, members of the Ahl al-Bayt (literally "people of the house" and direct descendants of the Prophet Mohammed, often transcribed as AhlulBayt) have direct access to the word of God and therefore the right to political rule. However, since the disappearance of the twelfth Imam in 874 AD (Shi'is believe that the Mahdi has gone into occultation and will reappear on the day of judgement), responsibility for the interpretation and transference of religious knowledge has fallen to the *'ulama*.

For this reason, the discursive authority of the '*ulama* is not merely limited to their status as religious scholars, but also has the power to shape and define *what it means to be Shi'a* at any particular temporal juncture and is therefore deeply invested in the construction and maintenance of what I am calling the "ideal" Shi'a subject. This is a subject defined by submission to the theological authority of the Shi'a clerical establishment, occupied with religious piety and observance, and invested in the ethno-political conflicts of Iranian and Iraqi manifestations of Shi'ism. I will begin with a brief history of the '*ulama*, before turning to an exploration of the way in which the institutionalisation of Shi'a clerical authority promotes a particular vision of the ideal (pious) Shi'a subject.

Shi'ism Without Borders: Religion and Clerical Authority

[64] The cities of Najaf, Karbala, Kadhimiya (now part of Baghdad), and Samarra in Iraq, and Qom and Mashhad in Iran are all home to significant shrines housing the remains of some of Shi'a Islam's most influential Imams, and represent key pilgrimage sites for practicing Shi'is from around the world.

While the nature and content of Shi'a Islamic theology has changed across time, and has historically been deeply implicated in the local political and social contexts in which it has been found (Deeb, 2005; Louër, 2011; Machlis, 2014; Nakash, 2003a, 2003b; Salloukh et al, 2015; Shaery-Eisenlohr, 2007), the rise of Shi'a transnationalism can be traced back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when the Safavid rulers encouraged clerics from today's Bahrain, Lebanon, and Iraq to settle in Persia as part of their campaign to convert the resident population to Shi'ism and to foment personal and political ties with coreligionists across the region. The changing relationship between the Shi'a religious establishment and political activism has also been shaped by the transnational influence of the shrine cities of Iraq and Iran; so much so that the networks of students and scholars that spread from the seminaries to head Islamist movements across the Middle East and South Asia from the early 1960s onwards became known as the "Shi'a International" (Mallat, 2003).

Despite the status of the Shi'a *'ulama* as "the quintessential transnational actor" (Corboz, 2015: 1), before launching into an account of the Shi'a clerical establishment it is first necessary to delineate what exactly is meant by the term "transnational" as applied throughout this thesis. Although any exiled group is by definition "transnational" in that it involves the displacement of individuals across national borders, diasporic transnationalism is understood here as "the emergence of a social process in which migrants establish social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders" and in particular the forging and maintenance of "multi-stranded social relations that link… [migrant] societies of origin and settlement" (Glick Schiller et al, 1992: ix). In this sense, what makes the (Iraqi-)Shi'a diasporic subject a *transnational* subject is not merely its association with transnational Shi'a Islam, but the active forging and sustaining of personal, political, economic, social, and religious ties across international borders (Al-

Ali and Koser, 2002; Adamson, 2005, 2010, 2013; Koinova, 2009; Leichtman, 2010; Lyons and Mandaville, 2010; Ong, 1999; Werbner, 2002).

Despite a variety of theological and doctrinal differences regarding the role of the *'ulama*,[65] over time these religious scholars have become increasingly institutionalised to the effect that they have come "to assume the executive functions originally invested in the Imams" (Corboz, 2015: 5). The right to interpret divine law for the benefit of the wider Shi'a population, however, cannot be assumed by any *'alim* but only by a *marja' al-taqlid* (source of emulation, pl. *maraji'*), leading to the establishment of a network of influential *maraji'* based in the shrine cities of Iraq and Iran and known as the *marja'iyya*. As a result of this theological context, *maraji'* "are the holders of [Shi'a] religious authority par excellence" (Corboz, 2015: 6).

Throughout the nineteenth century, the religious authority of the *marja'iyya* increasingly became centralised in the *hawzas* of Najaf (Corboz, 2015; Louër, 2011; van den Bos, 2015; Walbridge, 2001), and the shrine city has become a byword for Shi'a clerical authority today. A significant aspect of this institutionalisation was the *marja'iyya*'s assumption of the right to collect the *khums* (literally "fifth") a religious tax set at one-fifth of the giver's annual disposable income and originally comprising the *sahm al-imam* (the share of the Imam) in return for their services. In turn, the *maraji'* are responsible for reallocating the funds back to the community through networks of patronage and charity. In this sense, the authority of the *marja'iyya* derives not only from their status as highly educated interpreters of divine law, but also from the networks of capital and

[65] The most significant being the doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih* – a principle of Shi'a Islamic jurisprudence according to which a designated scholar assumes political guardianship in the absence of the twelfth Imam. The doctrine is most closely associated with the figure of Ayatollah Khomeini, who used it as a basis for the Iranian Revolution of 1979; indeed, support for *wilayat al-faqih* is often seen as synonymous for support for the Iranian regime, and represents a significant political and theological division within the clerical establishment.

investment in which they are embedded – individual Shi'is can choose which *maraji'* to whom they send their *khumus*, thus solidifying their ties to the clerical establishment on a material as well as psychological level.

Within the diasporic context, the various *maraji'* are represented by a number of religious and charitable organisations (more on this in Chapter 3), many of which are used to conduit funding and resources from diasporic Shi'is back to the shrine cities of Iraq and Iran (including through donations such as the *zakat* and *khums*). In this way, clerical networks of charity and patronage have successfully spread across national borders to represent a globalised and transnational form of Shi'a theological influence. Such examples point to the prominence of the clerical establishment in firstly shaping what it means to be "Shi'a" through the institutionalisation of theological and doctrinal authority and secondly, through the globalisation of clerical influence as a result of the transnational spread of material and symbolic networks of authority and patronage. Part of the enduring power of the *marja'iyya* is the prominent role individual scholars are able to play in defining what it means to "be Shi'a" through the institutionalisation of power structures in which a *marja'* comes to represent the highest possible source of authority regarding the ways in which individual practicing Shi'is should engage with their faith. It is to this that I now turn.

Fashioning the Shi'a Subject

Despite the lack of a formal institutionalised procedure for the designation of a singular source of emulation, the *'ulama* nevertheless follow an informal hierarchy according to the degree of religious knowledge possessed by an *'alim* and denoted by a series of honorific titles, progressing from Sheikh as the lowest sign of emulation to Grand Ayatollah as the highest. Since the ordinary practicing Shi'i is not considered to possess the required scholarly authority to interpret the word of God, they must rely on their

chosen *marja'* to act as an intermediary and to offer guidance on proper religious and spiritual practice. This choosing of a scholar to emulate is known as *taqlid* (lit. "to emulate/imitate"), and the decision is considered definitive; once an individual Shi'i has established which scholar they wish to emulate, they are (according to orthodox Shi'a theology) obliged to follow their rulings on all issues even if they personally disagree with them (Al-Hakim, 2010; Walbridge, 2001).[66] The practice of *taqlid* therefore promotes the formation of a pious and obedient Shi'a subject who is willing to follow the establishment in all decisions.

For this reason, the influence and authority of the *marja'iyya* is not derived solely from their status as learned scholars and involvement in transnational networks of power and patronage; it also has very real material and discursive effects on the shaping of Shi'a consciousness and religious practice. The very fact that each individual Shi'i is required to choose a *mujtahid* (Islamic jurist, i.e. scholar) to follow on matters of behaviour and religious practice, means that the *marja'iyya* play a significant role in shaping the discursive parameters of the pious Shi'a subject. Consider the following excerpt, taken from a book entitled *A Code of Practice for Muslims in the West in Accordance with the Edicts of Ayatullah al-Udhma as-Sayid Ali al-Hussain as-Seestani* [sic], which I came across in an English-language religious bookshop in Qom, Iran:

> *Taqlid* means acting according to the opinion of the jurist (*mujtahid*) who has all the necessary qualifications to be emulated. So you do what the *mujtahid*'s expert opinion says you should do, and abstain from what his expert opinion says you should abstain from without any research [in Islamic sources] on your

[66] There are a number of complex and contested rules for *taqlid*, the details of which I will not outline here.

> part. *It is as though you have placed the responsibility of your deed squarely on his shoulders.* (Sistani et al., 2001: 49, emphasis added)

What is interesting here is not merely the elevation of the *mujtahid* over and above the ordinary practicing Shi'i – who is not considered "qualified" enough to undertake their own research on religious issues – but the active transference of all moral and social responsibility from the individual to the scholar: "It is as though you have placed the responsibility of your deed squarely on his shoulders." Indeed, in the words of Walbridge (2001: 4): "To many Shi'a the opinions of the *marja'* are the 'final word' on an issue." To see this in practice, consider the following exchange between Sheikh Mohammed Shabani and H, a British-born Iraqi-Lebanese Shi'i, during a *hawza* class in Mashhad, Iran:

> **H:** Why should I follow a *marja'*; why can't I know [the answers] myself?
>
> **Sheikh:** If you yourself can know all about religion and know all the answers to all the problems you want to solve, you should be a *marja'* to yourself. If not, you should follow a *marja'*. For example, if you are a doctor, you do not need another doctor. But if you are an ordinary man and you get sick, you go to the doctor.
>
> **H:** But there are so many *maraji'* now; how do I know which is best?
>
> **Sheikh:** You can search. If you are an *'alim* you can find one yourself. If not, you can ask two scholars and if they both tell you to follow the same *marja'* you must accept their judgement.
>
> (Author's fieldnotes, 8 June 2015)

On a discursive level, the practice of *taqlid* thus actively encourages the dissolution of individual agency and the production of a malleable pious Shi'a subject whose actions are always-already predicated on the opinion and rulings of others. In other words, the

institution of the *marja'iyya* is invested in producing a discursively-defined Shi'a subject whose political and social agency is willingly transferred upwards towards the scholars themselves.[67] In such a conceptualisation, the ideal Shi'a subject cultivated and shaped by transnational Shi'a clerical authority is almost wholly stripped on any capacity for individual agency or reflection, and reveals itself as nothing more than a cog in a well-oiled machine that is being driven (depending on your political inclinations) either by Najaf or by Iran.

Contesting the (Ideal) Shi'a Subject

The problem with such a rigid understanding of the relationship between the *marja'iyya* and ordinary practicing Shi'is is twofold. Firstly, it assumes a linear relationship between the practice of *taqlid* and the transference of agency to the *mujtahid*; and secondly it confuses the discursive Shi'a subject – the ideal subject produced and cultivated by Shi'a clerical authority – and individual subjectivity and agency. This is where Lacanian discourse analysis proves useful in untangling the conceptual threads, as in Lacanian theory the subject is nothing more than "a place-holder, a linguistic category" (Epstein, 2010: 17), a discursively-defined position that is conceptually distinct from the individual as acting subject. In this sense, the obedient and malleable Shi'a subject encouraged by the clerical establishment is nothing more than an ideal type, a projected image of the pious practicing Shi'i that is often at odds with the lived reality of individual Shi'is themselves (recall H's questioning of the logic behind the practice of *taqlid*). Indeed, even the most strict and orthodox Shi'is I encountered during my fieldwork actively sought new and innovative ways to overcome factional and doctrinal differences between the rulings of various *maraji'* in order to go about their daily lives.

[67] It should be noted here that the discursive contours of this obedient, pious, and malleable ideal Shi'a subject are not wholly defined by the clerical establishment but are often further complemented through instrumentalised references to Shi'a religious ritual and mythology, such as the Battle of Karbala and the rituals surrounding 'Ashura – more on this later in the chapter.

Take the example of K and A, a young British-born couple in their early 20s who both follow Ayatollah Sistani. The pair met during a religious pilgrimage to Mecca and have been married since 2013. They both define themselves as practicing Shi'is and see religion as a significant part of their lives (K has worn the *hijab* since the age of 12 and A is active in a number of Shi'a institutions and youth groups in London). However, since both their families tend to follow either Khoei or Fadlallah, both of whom have different rulings than Sistani when it comes to fasting during Ramadan and the timing of the Eid feast, the pair told me that they drive from London to Worcester and back every year on the last day of Ramadan (a round trip of 266 miles) in order to travel the prerequisite distance of at least 224 miles in order to count as "travelling" and thus be exempt from fasting so that they can celebrate Eid with their families.[68] Such examples, although anecdotal, show that despite the discursive and material forces underlying the Iraqi-Shi'a subject, individual Iraqi Shi'is in the diaspora often find creative and innovative ways to engage with or contest specific forms of subjectivity if they conflict with their more immediate interests (in this case, to celebrate Eid as a family).

Thus while the transnational Iraqi-Shi'a subject is at least partly determined by the politico-religious contours of the Shi'a clerical establishment, individual Iraqi Shi'is are nevertheless able to negotiate and transform the boundaries of this subject – and their relative identification with it – in contextually-specific ways. In this way, the practice of *taqlid*, by which individuals subsume their personal opinions to the authority of a chosen scholar, thus ensures that intra-clerical disputes and political divisions are translated to the level of everyday practice for ordinary Shi'is and form a central role in shaping the contours of the ideal Shi'a subject (though not without ambivalence and contestation).

[68] Author's fieldnotes, 29 July 2014.

In this sense, the institution of the *marja'iyya* forms a key (though not conclusive) role in the shaping of the transnational Shi'a politico-religious subject, and imbues this subject both with the contested politics of the various factions of the transnational *'ulama* and with a specifically Iraqo-Iranian flavour as a result of the locally situated nature of the prominent *hawzas*. This is not to claim that all practicing Shi'a Muslims across the world necessarily look predominantly to Iraq and Iran as models of religious piety and political activism – despite the increasing salience of the signifier "Iraq" in iterations of diasporic Shi'a identity, as outlined in Chapter 1 – but that the transnational *Shi'a subject* is discursively embedded in networks of religious power and authority that are intimately tied to the domestic contexts of both Iraq and Iran. In particular, the religious shrines and seminaries of Najaf, Karbala, Qom, and Mashhad loom large in the Shi'a transnational imaginary, especially when it comes to the transference of religious authority and knowledge and performances of Shi'a piety in the diasporic space.[69] Increasingly, the political and religious links between the two countries are coming to shape the experience of Iraqi Shi'is in the diaspora, especially as the social, economic, and political divisions that exist among members of the transnational clerical establishment come to be translated into locally-situated rivalries within the London context. It is to the significance of Iran as the symbolic political representative of Shi'a Islam in the contemporary world, that I now turn.

Shi'a Geographies: Iran and the Waxing "Shi'a Crescent"

[69] Pilgrimage networks also form an important part of the transnationalisation of the Shi'a subject and the enduring influence of the Iraqi and Iranian shrine cities. This is something I explore further in Chapter 5.

> A spectre is abroad in the Middle East: the spectre of a Shi'ite threat. In recent months opinion-makers not only in Washington, but also in the region have discerned a fundamental threat to the status quo in the Middle East in the form of a global Shia, controlled from Teheran. (Bröning, 2008: 60)

Since the toppling of Saddam Hussain and the rise to power of the Shi'a Da'wa Party in post-2003 Iraq, mainstream media and policy discourses have been saturated by the somewhat sensationalist notion of an emerging "Shi'a crescent"[70] stretching across Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, and dominated by the Islamic Republic of Iran (Amos, 2010; Barzegar, 2008a; Haqani, 2008; Nasr, 2004, 2006, among others). At the heart of this notion of rising Shi'a political dominance in the Middle East is the spectre of a strong and antagonist Iran, sitting at the centre of a network of Shi'a political, religious, and social networks that transcend national borders and reach out far across the region and beyond. In this vision, Iran is painted as akin to a metaphorical spider sitting amidst a Shi'a transnational web, able to tweak and pull various strings in different directions as and when it sees fit; and always in ways that promote both its domestic national interests and ensure the maintenance of its regional and international power.

Despite the problematic and acontextual nature of such an image (not to mention the zealousness verging on paranoia with which it is propagated in some policy and media

[70] The concept of a "Shi'a crescent" derives from a remark made by King Abdullah II of Jordan in December 2004 during an interview with the *Washington Post* in which he called attention to the potential threat constituted by what he characterised as a growing Iranian influence in the region. The term quickly entered US policy discourse – in 2006, for example, the Council on Foreign Relations held a symposium entitled 'The Emerging Shi'a Crescent' that aimed to address US foreign policy interests in the region – and was most notably propagated by US presidential advisor and academic Vali Nasr, whose various books and policy papers o the topic outlined his theory of a "Shi'a rise" in the region (Nasr 2004, 2006). It should be noted, however, that both the term "Shi'a crescent" and the notion of rising Shi'a political influence in the Middle East is hotly contested, most prominently by scholars such as Proctor (2008) and Bröning (2008), as well as by numerous policy makers and journalists across the Middle East and the West.

circles), there are elements of truth in this portrayal when it comes firstly to the influence and reach of Shi'a transnational religious networks across the Middle East and beyond (as explored above) and secondly to the symbolic significance of Iran as the only country in the world governed and ruled by a Shi'a Islamist government.[71] In this sense, while it may be easy to dismiss the notion of a rising "Shi'a crescent" as "mythical" (Proctor, 2008), "alarmist", and "imaginary" (Bröning, 2008: 72), in order to develop a full and nuanced account of the ways in which Shi'a political and religious ideology is productive of certain forms of political subjectivity it is necessary to take seriously the material and symbolic resonance of Iran as the quintessential "Big Shi'a" (an intentional perversion of the concept of the "Big Other" in Lacanian theory) in order to understand the various ideological and discursive forces productive of the Shi'a subject under inquiry.

Imagining Iran: The "Backbone" of the Shi'a World

Much as "Iraq" has increasingly been imbued with Shi'a ethno-religious symbolism as historical locus of the Battle of Karbala and contemporary battleground of sectarian tensions in the Middle East, so too does the symbolic signifier "Iran" hold a palimpsest of affective colourings for practicing Shi'is as a result of the Islamic Republic's status as the only Shi'a-run country in the world. Particularly since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which despite being a product of domestic political and economic circumstances drew heavily on Shi'a Islamic mythology and doctrine in order to justify its revolutionary zeal (more on this later), Iran has sought to achieve geopolitical significance as the global representative of Shi'a Islam. In the words of Ayatollah Ali Khameini, speaking in 1986, Iran "will survive, defend and protect our revolution and help others in the same cause of Islam to establish the rule of God wherever they are in the world" (Haynes, 2001: 154).

[71] Interestingly, secular Iranians often refer to Islam in general and Shi'ism in particular as an "Arab" import; while Sunni political groups in Iraq and in countries such as Saudi Arabia increasingly point to the rise of Shi'a religious and political networks in Iraq and elsewhere as evidence of "Iranian influence" in the region – highlighting the problematic nature of such ethno-culturist attempts to simplify Shi'a Islam into a singular essentialised essence.

In this sense, Iran can be seen as the archetypal "Big Shi'a", akin to the Lacanian "Big Other", in relation to which the Shi'a subject comes to define itself. For ordinary practicing Shi'is, the symbolic resonance of Iran as the historical home of revolutionary Shi'ism (through the 1979 revolution) and the contemporary centre of Shi'a geopolitical influence through material networks of patronage, funding, and allegiance (what has been referred to as Iran's exporting of "mullahs, money, and militias" (Slavin, 2008)) thus comes to play a significant role in defining what it means to be "Shi'a" within the contemporary moment. In particular, Iran has been active in cultivating symbolic and material ties with transnational political and religious groups since at least the 1979 revolution, and especially since the rise to power of Shi'a Islamist parties in post-Saddam Iraq.[72] For Iraqi Shi'is in the diaspora, Iran often served a place of refuge from political and/or religious persecution under the Saddam regime; as well as representing the most significant Shi'a politico-religious force in the contemporary world. Indeed, for many Shi'is exiled from Iraq as a result of the *tasfirat*, Iran became not only a temporary home, but a place of sanctuary in an otherwise hostile region – many Iraqis declared *taba'iyya Iraniyya* still have family ties to Iran as a result of this historical population transfer. For this reason, Iran continues to loom large in articulations of the (Iraqi-)Shi'a diasporic subject, even if Iranian influence is itself more ambivalent and contested than such discourses imply.

This discursive power of Iran to mould the content of the orientation "Shi'a" holds true even in the face of political contestation with the Iranian regime itself. As one of my interviewees, a young British-born Iraqi Shi'a woman, put it: "I don't support [the Iranian regime], but if anyone insults Iran I get defensive because I feel like they're insulting all

[72] A full inquiry into the various links between the Iranian regime and Shi'a political factions in Iraq falls outside of the scope of this thesis, which is preoccupied with the *diasporic* (Iraqi-)Shi'a subject, and is therefore not pursued further here.

Shi'is."[73] Indeed, one young British Shi'a man of Iraqi origin, even went to far as to declare that he would be willing to "fight for Iran" if necessary:

> **A:** I'd fight for my religion as well. If somebody tries to attack Iran I'd go fight for Iran.
>
> **EDE:** For Iran?
>
> **A:** For Iran.
>
> **EDE:** Why Iran?
>
> **A:** Because the only backbone that the Shi'a world has at the moment is Iran, whether you wanna agree with their political stance [or] you don't. If Iran falls, there would be a massacre for all Shi'as all around the world. *All* around the world. (Interview 6)

In this iteration, the signifier "Iran" is being used to denote Shi'a religious identification, even in the absence of political accord with the Iranian regime itself. In this sense, "Iran" manifests discursively as a hollowed-out symbol, a representation devoid of nuance or context that works to produce a particular iteration of the Shi'a subject; one invested in political antagonism with the non-Shi'a world where the dominance of "Iran" acts as sole bulwark against a global "massacre for all Shi'as".

Contrary to those scholars who claim that it is Iran's political message that resonates across the "Shi'a crescent" (Amos, 2010; Barzegar, 2008a; Haqani, 2008; Nasr, 2004, 2006, among others), the above examples point more to the symbolic significance of "Iran" as a discursive placeholder for "the Shi'a world", rather than to the revolutionary appeal of the Islamic Republic's ideological brand of Shi'a Islamism or the doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih*. For Iraqi Shi'is, especially those forced to leave Iraq during the 1980s

[73] Conversation with S. Author's fieldnotes, 2 June 2014.

partly as a result of Saddam Hussain's paranoid obsession with an Iranian-backed Shi'a "fifth column" inside Iraq, Iran holds symbolic resonance more as a result of historical and material ties between the two countries than from any political commitment to Iranian regional dominance. In the words of prominent Iraqi diasporan Ghanem Jawad:[74]

> When discussing Iranian influence the most important factor to bear in mind is that Iraqi Shi'is are very receptive to traditional Iranian influence but they reject the ideological influence of the Islamic Republic on the grounds that it is divisive.[75]

Despite the very real differences between certain Iraqi and Iranian interpretations of Shi'ism (Alshamary, 2013; Baram, 1981; Batatu, 1981; Cole, 2002; Dabashi, 2011a; Faleh, 2003; Haddad, 2011; Marr, 1985; Nakash, 2002, 2003a; Nasr, 2004), historical and material links between the two countries have nevertheless led to multiple convergences that can occasionally muddy the water when it comes to drawing clear ethno-national boundaries between Iraqi and Iranian Shi'is. Indeed, as one of my research participants confessed to me: "I get confused about which one I am; if I'm with Arabs they think I'm Iranian, and if I'm with Iranians they think I'm Arab."[76] Much of this blurring of the boundary between "Iraqi" and "Iranian" categories of identification is the natural product of historically close ties between the two countries, especially as a result of their geographical proximity and the existence of transnational religious, educational, and political networks cultivated by the clerical establishment. Indeed, it was partly as a

[74] At the time of the interview, Jawad was serving as head of Culture and Human Rights at the Al-Khoei Foundation in London; he currently runs the Humanitarian Dialogue Foundation based in Edgware Road, a nominally secular institution that nevertheless receives funding from the Shi'a clerical establishment.
[75] Source: http://www.meforum.org/meib/articles/0405_iraqi.htm, accessed 14 August 2017.
[76] Conversation with R Author's fieldnotes, 24 May 2014. For a more in-depth discussion of the blurred boundaries between Iraqi and Iranian Shi'is in the diaspora, see Degli Esposti (2017).

result of such ties that led to significant numbers of Iraqi Shi'is being branded as "Iranian" (*taba'iyya Iraniyya*) by the Saddam regime.

This is not to claim that all Iraqi Shi'is necessarily feel some affinity to Iran, and vice versa (indeed, many Iranians are fiercely nationalistic and consider themselves to be fundamentally different from "Arab" Iraqis), but that when it comes to defining the (Iraqi-)Shi'a subject, there is a fundamental national and cultural ambivalence that persists between Iraqi and Iranian manifestations of Shi'a politico-religious belief and practice. Often, this ambivalence is manifested via a discursive invocation of "Iran" as representing the "Shi'a subject" more broadly, and the possible identifications open to practicing Iraqi Shi'is in particular.

In the diasporic context, where the minority status of Shi'a Islam within the UK means that many Shi'a religious establishments are frequented by both Iraqi and Iranian Shi'is (as well as Shi'is from other ethno-national backgrounds), the significance of Iran as the "backbone of the Shi'a world" has been emphasised even as specific orientations towards Iraqi or Iranian national belonging have faded (Gholami, 2016; Scharbrodt et al., 2017; Scharbrodt and Shanneik, 2018; Spellman-Poots, 2012; van den Bos, 2012). In this sense, a shared articulation of "Shi'aness" among practicing Shi'is in the UK (regardless of origin), often coloured with orientations towards Iran as the symbolic "Big Shi'a", is more significant in shaping the contours of the diasporic Shi'a subject than any specific political or ideological attachment to Iranian Shi'ism.

"Mullahs, Money, and Militias"[77]

As well as its status as the only Shi'a-majority government in the contemporary world, Iran has long represented a significant regional power in the Middle East due both to its

[77] (Slavin, 2008)

historical dominance bolstered by its strategic position on the Persian Gulf and, more recently, as a result of its extensive natural resources such as gas and oil. Moreover, since the (Shi'a) Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran has played an active role in supporting and expanding Shi'a interests in region, including providing funding, training, and arms to militia groups in countries such as Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine. Coupled with the theological and doctrinal influence of Shi'a clerics operating out of the Iranian shrine cities of Mashhad and Qom, it is possible to see how Iranian material and discursive power has come to play a significant role in defining what it means to be "Shi'a" in the contemporary world. It is this perception of Iran as the provider of "mullahs, money, and militias" (Slavin, 2008), that lies at the heart of the notion of a waxing "Shi'a crescent" in the Middle East. Most recently, rising sectarian tensions within the region, compounded by enduring antagonism between Iran and its geopolitical rival Saudi Arabia, have bolstered the conception of Iran as a key source of Shi'a transnational religious, political, economic, and discursive power.

In London, for example, the Islamic Centre of England (ICE), founded in 1995, is widely known to be directly funded by the Iranian government. Unlike most other Shi'a religious institutions in London ICE is not registered as a charitable organisation, meaning that it is under no obligation to make its accounts publically available. The Centre offers a wide variety of events and services, including holding an annual Imam Khomeini Conference, which it hosts in collaboration with its youth branch AhlulBayt Islamic Mission (AIM). Unlike ICE, which mostly models itself as a community and religious centre (its website, for example, describes the organisation rather innocuously as providing "spiritual guidance for the Muslim community at large"[78]), AIM, founded in 2003, is much more actively involved in promoting a specific vision of (Shi'a) Islam through its events, outreach programmes, and social media presence (including a YouTube channel,

[78] ICE website, accessed 2 July 2016.

Facebook page – boasting more than 479,000 likes – and a Twitter profile). The organisation's website, for example, offers a modernised and hybridised version of Shi'a Islam geared towards the younger generation, with blog posts sporting titles such as "The Tweeting Ayatollah", "Rock Star Imams", and "The Struggles of a 'Towel Head'" (a reference to derogatory slang for a *hijabi*).[79]

Both ICE and AIM serve the dual roles of acting as communal meeting points for like-minded Shi'is in the diaspora and as proselytisers of a revolutionary and Iranian-inflected brand of Shi'a Islam through the spreading of the teachings of Imam Khomeini and other Islamic jurists who support *wilayat al-faqih*. Such examples point to the way in which Iranian political and religious influence has been institutionalised in the diasporic context, often through reliance on pre-existing transnational networks of patronage and funding set up by the clerical establishment. Having highlighted above the symbolic and doctrinal significance of the *marja'iyya* in producing and maintaining the discursive contours of the ideal Shi'a subject, it is also important to acknowledge the role of Iran when it comes to the transnational spread and influence of the Shi'a religious establishment. Many of the most prominent clerical lineages have important historical and contemporary connections to Iran, both as a geographic entity and as a source of material and theological support (Corboz, 2015). Moreover, Iran has significant ties to the ruling Da'wa Party in Iraq, which subscribes to the Iranian doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih* and has been documented as receiving funding and support from the Iranian regime – even if, historically the party has had an ambivalent relationship with Tehran (Barzegar, 2008a; Nasr, 2004; Shaery-Eisenlohr, 2007; Slavin, 2008).

[79] AIM website (http://www.aimislam.com), accessed 4 July 2016.

Three of Shi'ism's most prominent Shi'a clerical lineages – the al-Khoei, al-Hakim, and al-Sadr families – have significant historical and material ties to Iran. [80] The al-Hakim family in particular, despite their Iraqi origins, are closely associated with the Islamic Republic as a result of their exile in Iran during the Saddam era, where they established the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) (now known as the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI)). Founded in Tehran in 1982, SCIRI arguably represents "the most pro-Iranian faction of the broader Iraqi Shi'i Islamic movement" (Corboz, 2015: 17), and came to play a prominent role in Iraqi opposition politics throughout the 1980s and 90s. SCIRI's military wing, the Badr Corps, which grew out of the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-88, became notorious as an Iranian-funded militia during the sectarian violence of post-2003 Iraq. Having cultivated ties with the US throughout the 1990s, SCIRI found itself in a good position to profit from the post-2003 sectarian political landscape in Iraq, and at the time of writing ISCI commands 12 out of 325 seats in the Iraqi Council of Representatives.[81]

The al-Sadr family, too, have close links to the Islamic Republic. Among the most influential members of the family in the twentieth century were Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr (1935-1980), the founding father of the Da'wa Party; Musa al-Sadr (1928-1978?), who founded the Lebanese militant Amal movement; Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr (1943-1999), a well-respected cleric who opposed the Ba'th regime and called for the release of Shi'a political prisoners; and Muqata al-Sadr, the founder of the Mehdi Army, a Shi'a militia popular with disenfranchised working-class Iraqi Shi'is in post-2003 Iraq (now reformulated as the anti-ISIS Saraya al-Salam, "Peace Companies"). Additionally, members of the Sadr family

[80] Despite their material links to Iran, it should be noted that the al-Khoei family have made efforts to distance themselves from the Iranian regime and in particular the doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih*.
[81] In recent years, ISCI has attempted to distance itself from its Iranian patrons by emphasising its "Iraqi" origins; nevertheless, the movement is still strongly associated with the Islamic Republic and continues to receive funding and support from Tehran.

have headed the Iranian Red Crescent, served in the Iranian parliament, and married into political and clerical networks in Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon (Corboz, 2015; Slavin, 2008).

In this sense, the Shi'a clerical establishment's social and material links to Iran – through personal, political, and financial ties of patronage, scholarship, and association – have fostered a particular understanding of Shi'a transnational identity in which what it means to be "Shi'a" is always-already coloured with the politico-religious flavour of the Islamic Republic. The case of Muqtada al-Sadr serves as an interesting exemplar, since despite his lack of institutionally sanctioned religious authority (he has yet to achieve a high level of eminence within the *'ulama*) and his appeals to populist Iraqi nationalism, both of which might suggest a lack of affinity with the Iranian regime, Muqtada has nevertheless "relied on Iran for military support for his Mehdi Army, as a buffer against the United States, and as a mediator in his quarrels with the Iraqi government and breakaway Shi'ite factions" (Slavin, 2008: 5). What this shows is that Iranian influence remains a significant factor in the shaping of the Shi'a transnational subject, especially when it comes to defining the politico-religious contours of what it means to "Shi'a" in the contemporary moment (often defined in opposition to a "Sunni" aggressor; though more on this later).

Nevertheless, and contrary to the simplistic doctrine of an unstoppable "Shi'a crescent" headed by a muscular Iran, the relationship between Iran and transnational Shi'ism – and especially between Iraqi Shi'a political factions and the Iranian regime – is more ambivalent, multifaceted, and contradictory than might first appear. For example, despite SCIRI's ties to the Iranian regime and professed founding goal to export the Iranian revolution to Iraq, since 2003 the organisation has put a significant amount of effort into symbolically distancing itself from Iran and emphasising its Iraqi roots as a way to garner domestic support. In the words of Corboz (2015: 154), in post-2003 SCIRI

discourse "the revolutionary power of Shi'ism was emphasised, but in its Iraqi colouring". Indeed, when SCIRI changed its name to ISCI in 2007, removing the word "revolution" to reportedly "reflect the changing situation in Iraq" and "as a step to the Iraqisation of the Islamic parties in Iraq" (Karouny, 2007), the organisation also publically declared its religious allegiance to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and not to Khomeini or Khamenei. Such discursive manoeuvring is indicative of the political fault-lines that continue to exist between Iraqi and Iranian manifestations of Shi'ism, and in particular of the ways in which Shi'a political emancipation in Iraq has historically been tied to manifestations of Iraqi nationalism in a way that belies the all-encompassing influence of Iran as the ultimate power over the shaping of the Shi'a transnational subject

"There is no Big Other":[82] *The Shi'a Subject Beyond Iran*

The above examples demonstrate how the relationship between the Iranian state and the (Iraqi-)Shi'a diasporic subject is more fluid, multifaceted, and disputed than might first be assumed; and that there is no direct causal link between the Iranian regime's funding and support for Shi'a Islamist parties and institutions in Iraq and elsewhere and support for the Iranian political project in the diaspora. Rather, Iran occupies a discursively complex position serving alternately as the symbolic core of Shi'a Islamist politics and religious sentiment, and an antagonistic and interfering state whose military aggression and political ambition is stifling the possibility for home-grown Shi'a opposition parties in Iraq (Roschanack, 2007; Slavin, 2008; Wastnidge, 2015). Furthermore, the factional and populist nature of the Shi'a clerical establishment, where different clerical lineages compete for the loyalty and funds of individual practicing Shi'is, means that in religious terms Iran does not hold as much authority over ordinary Shi'is as may be first assumed. Indeed, even within Iran a significant proportion of

[82] (Lacan, 2004)

practicing Shi'is choose to follow *maraji'* who are not linked to the Iranian revolutionary project and who actively reject *wilayat al-faqih*[83] (Slavin, 2008).

For many diasporic Iraqi Shi'is, therefore, the sphere of Iran's transnational influence emanates more from its symbolic status as a majority-Shi'a country and the only Shi'a-run government in the world than from any personal commitment to the Islamic Republic's political or religious project.[84] Indeed, even despite both the historical links between the two countries and the symbolic role of Iran as the "backbone" of Shi'a Islam, there remain a significant number of Iraqi Shi'is in the diaspora who are intensely opposed to the Islamic Republic, either politically or theologically. As one of my research participants noted: "Just because Iran is Shi'a doesn't mean all Shi'is support it. My mum, for example, *hates* Iran, even though she herself is half Iranian and spent time living there."[85]

Indeed, despite efforts by the Iranian regime to fund and orchestrate institutions and programmes across the world, within the context of diasporic London the radius of the Islamic Republic's influence is narrower than is perhaps first assumed. ICE and AIM are only two among the more than 50 Shi'a organisations in London (most of which have links to the *marja'iyya* in Najaf and are unmistakably *Iraqi* in their political and nationalistic leanings, or are connected to alternative visions of Shi'a Islam through the Khoja or South Asian communities) and have limited appeal among the diaspora as a whole. As one interviewee put it to me: "If you go to the Islamic Centre, then you are saying to everyone that you support Iran and you support *wilayat al-faqih* – and there

[83] Examples include such Ayatollah Sistani, the late Ayatollah al-Khoei, the late Ayatollah Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr, and Ayatollah Fadlallah.
[84] This is not to say that there are no Iraqi Shi'is in the diaspora who support *wilayat al-faqih*, indeed many do, but that Iranian influence in the diaspora is not limited to this particular political project but also assumes a significant symbolic dimension regardless of the personal political conviction of individual Shi'is.
[85] Interview 5.

are a lot of people who don't want to be associated with that" (Interview 5). Moreover, the complex history of exile and migration from Iraq to the UK, and the haunting association of *taba'iyya Iraniyya*, means that many diasporic Iraqi Shi'is actively attempt to distance themselves from Iran. One family I spent time with during my fieldwork, for example, actually changed their surname from Shahroukhshahi (an obviously Iranian name) to the Abujeloud in order to appear more "Arab".

In this sense, it is possible to see how the symbolic signifier "Iran" comes to adopt alternative meanings in different contexts; whether that be as a representation of transnational clerical authority, global Shi'a power, Iranian nationalism (contra to Iraqi nationalism), the Iranian regime, the doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih*, or Iran as a geopolitical power in the international system. Each of these iterations, in turns, manifests as an alternative articulation of the Shi'a subject, whether that be one coloured by Iraqi nationalistic opposition to Iranian influence, an orientation towards a transnational and trans-ethnic "Shi'a international, or a declaration of Shi'a Islamist ideology predicated on an Iranian revolutionary zeal.

"Iran", in such articulations, represents the archetypal Other – or "Big Shi'a" – to the Shi'a subject. In Lacanian theory we know that "there is no Big Other", since the Symbolic order within which it is articulated is necessarily incomplete and unstable(Howarth, 1998; Lacan, 2002; Laclau and Mouffe, 2001). However, it is this very instability that requires the subjective iteration (or rather, re-iteration) of the Other's desire in a desperate attempt by the subject to construct itself in relation to that desire. It is precisely this subjective predicament that forms the basis of the transition from *alienation* (within the symbolic order) to *anxiety* regarding the true desire of the Other – which Lacan summaries in the anxious question "*Che vuoi?*", "What do you want?" (Lacan,

2002). It is this thwarted attempt to subsume subjective desire into Other's desire that is fulfilled by the role of ideological fantasy (Žižek, 1989, 2000, 2012). [86]

In Lacanian terms, then, the symbolic signifier "Iran" cannot represent a stable and inflexible "Big Shi'a" to the Shi'a subject; rather, the various representations of "Iran" represent various iterations of the Shi'a subject in a doomed effort to paper over the instability inherent in the Symbolic order. For this reason, not only is it misleading to overstate the role of Iran as the geopolitical power behind a transnational "Shi'a crescent", it is also important to understand the limitations of the symbolic signifier "Iran" when it comes to defining and shaping the meaning and content of what it means to be "Shi'a". From the material and doctrinal influence of the *marja'iyya*, to the symbolic resonance of Iran as the archetypal "Big Shi'a", the Shi'a subject is thus subjected to a variety of discursive forces that work to shape it as an unattainable ideal-type.

Moreover, the very instability at the core of any identity iteration necessitates a perpetual process of identification and re-identification that foregrounds the role of *performativity* – the mechanism via which performances of any particular identity category are themselves constitutive of that very identity (Butler, 1997, 2011a, 2011b; Puar et al., 2012). One further significant factor in the production of the Shi'a subject yet to be explored is the role of Shi'a ritual and theology, especially with regards to the politicisation of Shi'a religious mythology throughout the latter part of the twentieth century and the performative practices associated with Shi'a ritual and commemoration. It is to this transformation that I now turn, as a way to underscore the contemporary discursive articulation of the Shi'a subject as an *ethical* subject.

From Mu'awiya to ISIS: Towards a *Shi'a* Political Ethics

[86] The role of fantasy and desire in shaping the Shi'a subject is explored further in Chapter 4.

> Shi'ism is the shimmering memory of an event, a dream, a single traumatic incident, condemned forever to try to remember itself in vain… Shi'ism is a poem, a eulogy, an epic, a panegyric pausing for a moment for history to recollect itself and start anew. Shi'ism is Karbala. (Dabashi, 2011: xi–xii)

Although there is no single, unitary "thing" that can be called "Shi'ism", just as there is no single, monolithic community that can be called "Shi'a", there are multiple convergences of religious, social and political narratives and ritualistic enactments that coalesce around the identity category constructed (but not wholly contained) by the word "Shi'a". The ideological split between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims originally occurred over a succession dispute following the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 AD, with Shi'is believing that Muhammad appointed his cousin and son-in-law, Ali, as his rightful successor (the term "Shi'a" comes from the Arabic *Shi'at Ali*, meaning "the followers of Ali"). This initial dispute eventually culminated in an uprising orchestrated by the Prophet's grandson (and Ali's son) Hussain in 680 AD following the death of the (Sunni) caliph Mu'awiya I that resulted in the massacre of Hussain and his family at the Battle of Karbala by Mu'awiya's son Yazid I. Although doctrinal differences between Sunni and Shi'a Islam are not always apparent, and the two sects share many similarities when it comes to the everyday practice of Islam, Shi'a Muslims observe several different rituals than their Sunni co-religionists; most notably their ritual commemoration of the Battle of Karbala during 'Ashura and Arba'een, the tenth and fortieth days of the Islamic month of Muharram respectively.

The traumatic memory of the Battle of Karbala, with its political and theological repercussions for adherents of Shi'ism, thus arguably "generated the central Shi'a paradigm" (Hegland 1998: 251), a moment of rupture around which all forms of Shi'a

identification and ritual practice coalesce (albeit alternatively re-iterated). Although for much of Shi'a history this narrative of trauma and suffering occupied the realm of mythology and memory (Feder, 2014), during the latter half of the 20th century, and particularly as a result of the Iranian Revolution, the "Karbala paradigm" was "transformed from an originary myth… into a mobilising narrative of political struggle and self-sacrifice" (Khalili 2007: 29). Karbala, and the mnemonic and commemorative rituals associated with it, thus became central to the articulation and performance of a specifically *Shi'a* religious identity; an identity that was imbued with political status through its implication in contemporary power structures of political emancipation and revolution. In performative theory expressions of identity, although appearing naturalised, are actually the effects of social and political discourses that reinforce and crystallise the supposed "identity" each time they are performed or articulated. Through this process, "identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler 2006: 34). The Karbala paradigm is thus central to both the production, (re)iteration, and performance of the Shi'a subject within the diasporic discursive imaginary.

In the diasporic space, such rituals and narratives of defiance and resistance held affective and emotive resonance for individuals and communities who found themselves exiled from their homelands and forced to rebuild their lives. For Iraqi Shi'is in particular, who had been unable to freely express their religious affiliation or to engage in such religious rituals and practices under the watchful eye of the Ba'th Party in Iraq, the Karbala paradigm took on new meaning as a ritualised politics of religious expression and emancipation through the suffering of exile and loss.

> The 'Ashura narrative is the attempt to recover the dangerous memory of Karbala and apply it to the social, religious, and political context of Iraqi Shi'i

> communities… In the context of exile it becomes the narrative of loss, dislocation, emerging realities and new religious articulations. (Flynn, 2013: 226).

For this reason, the various religious rituals and practices associated with the commemoration of Karbala are key to understanding the politics of performativity and identification when it comes to defining what it means to be "Shi'a" in the contemporary world. In particular, the (re)articulation, (re)imagination and (re)iteration of the Karbala paradigm in the diasporic space is fundamental to the shaping of a politicised (Iraqi-)Shi'a diasporic subject; one invested in the dynamics of contemporary power structures and undergirded by a particular form of Shi'a ethics. Here, I seek first to provide a brief sketch of the political contexts in which Shi'a rituals and myths became transformed into mobilising narratives of emancipation throughout the latter part of the twentieth century, before turning to the ways in which these rituals have been performatively enacted within the diasporic space. Indeed, as Yuval-Davis highlights, "religious practices and beliefs can become some of the most intractable and inflexible symbolic border guards to belonging to specific collective boundaries", to the construction and policing of collective identities (Yuval-Davis 2011: 117). Religious ritual, in other words, emerges as an aspect of performative identity (or rather, of the re-iterations of failed identification) that can be perceived, experienced, and analysed through its use of aesthetic and affective practices (cf. Mandoki, 2007).

Finally, I turn to the contemporary moment in order to explore the ways in which sectarianised narratives of Shi'a victimhood and persecution have been constructed around symbolic representations of Sunni aggression as defined by Western media discourse (most notably through the empty signifier "ISIS"), and how such narrative are themselves predicated on the historical model of the Karbala paradigm. In this sense, the

politicisation of Shi'a ritual aesthetics through a suturing of historical precedence and contemporary context has come to define the possible articulations of the Shi'a subject in the diasporic imaginary.

From Mythology to Revolution: Shi'ism and the Politics of Emancipation

Despite significant scholarly emphasis on the revolutionary nature of Shi'a theology and practice (Hegland 1998; Cole 2002; Jabr 2003; Khalili 2007; Gale and Hopkins 2009; Ridgeon 2012; Flynn 2013; Flaskerud 2014, among others) – indeed, Shi'ism has been characterised by some scholars as the quintessential "religion of protest" (Dabashi 2011a) – the politicisation of Shi'ism is actually a relatively recent phenomenon, and arose out of the political and social contexts of countries with significant Shi'a populations (most notably Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon) in the latter half of the twentieth century. In particular, "the historic shift within Shi'ism from passive eschatological expectations for salvation to active confrontation with temporal forces" (Feder, 2014: 95–96) owes much to the influence of scholars such as Ayatollah Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr and Ali Shariati, whose writings were later re-interpreted by Ayatollah Khomeini to provide the inspiration for the Islamic revolution in Iran.

For example, al-Sadr's 1955 text re-examining the figure of Fatima (the daughter of the Prophet) in Islamic history "represents the earliest efforts in modern Shi'i discourse to reinterpret parables in an activist spirit" (Feder, 2014: 83). Written in the context of Shi'a economic and political marginalisation in Iraq, which had mostly been ruled by a Sunni minority since the creation of the Iraqi state in 1921,[87] Sadr's reinterpretation of Fatima

[87] Although the majority of political figures in twentieth-century Iraq were indeed Sunni, there were also a number of prominent Shi'is among the ruling elite, including Sayyid Salih Jabr, Sayyid Muhammad al-Sadr, and Fadhil al-Jamali (who was Prime Minister in 1953 and 1954). Nevertheless, the widespread perception – both at the time and retrospectively – is that Sunnis tended to dominate the elite social and political classes in Iraq throughout the twentieth century, despite their relative demographic minority (Batatu, 2012; Bengio, 1998; Davis, 2005; Haddad, 2014; Sassoon, 2011; Tripp, 2002).

from passive victim to indignant revolutionary laid the groundwork for a theological shift within Shi'a Islam that reimagined Shi'ism as a historic battle against the forces of tyranny and injustice. Similarly, the transformation of the Karbala myth throughout the 1960s and 70s by Iranian leftist intellectual Ali Shariati (who coined the term "red Shi'ism" to describe his revolutionary brand of Shi'a emancipatory struggle) became influential in a number of Shi'a political and religious movements within the intellectual and political climate of the late twentieth century. As Brunner outlines:

> The deeply rooted feeling of historical injustice [felt by disenfranchised Shi'is in Middle East] was the more easily translatable into revolutionary activism as the Shi'ite tradition provided the adequate model, namely, the remembrance of Husayn's [sic] suffering in Karbala… it was leftist intellectuals influenced by Marxism and Third World solidarity such as Ali Shariati (d. 1977) who attacked the traditional clergy over political issues and who saw Husayn's martyrdom as the revolutionary way out of oppression. The slogan "every day is 'Ashura, every place is Karbala" that was coined by Shariati proved to be the most successful catchword of the Shiite awakening and came to be quoted also elsewhere and at different times, notably in the context of the nascent Hezbollah in Lebanon and its struggle against Israel… According to this logic, Husayn did not suffer a crushing military defeat, but actively fought a numerically superior enemy, and, through his readiness to undergo martyrdom, set an eternal role model for the suppressed Shi'ites everywhere. (Brunner, 2009: 140)

In other words, the revolutionary nature of Shi'a rituals and myths is not inherent to Shi'a theology, but rather crystallised against the political, social, economic, and intellectual background of the Middle East during the late twentieth century. It was this intellectual and theological tradition that laid the groundwork for Ayatollah Khomeini's reimagining

of Shi'a theology in the late 1970s, and provided the discursive underpinnings of the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. In particular, Khomeini drew heavily on the normative logic of the revolutionary Karbala paradigm to bequeath "his country an ideology that divided the world between the oppressed and the oppressors... [and] enshrined the principle of resisting tyranny" (Takeyh, 2009: 2). The Iranian Revolution thus pulled together diverse strands of Shi'a mythology to produce an ethical framework in which to be "Shi'a" was simultaneously to be invested in an enduring struggle against injustice and oppression:

> The moral conviction of "the [Shi'a] Islamic ideology" leads… towards the ethical imperative that both the ideology and the [Iranian] Revolution so strongly imply. Renuciatory demands are self-imposed on part of these ideologues, particularly in the case of Khomeini, in order to denounce the ideological opposition not on merely political but, more important, on moral grounds. The central idea of "justice"… is integral to this moral obligation to change the shape of a communal order in which "injustice" is perceived to reign supreme. The immediate effect of assuming such high moral grounds is a deeply rooted communal solidarity… in which every activist believes him or herself to serve the cause of nothing less than absolute and universal justice. (Dabashi, 1993: 505–506)

It is this injunction to "be (a good) Shi'a", discursively constructed as an ethical imperative to be "just", that, I argue, forms the core of contemporary articulations of the sectarianised Shi'a subject. Consider the following quote, taken from an interview with a British-born Iraqi Shi'a man:

> They say: "Oh, there's only a few Shi'is, there's more Sunnis, we must be right." No, there might be a few Shi'is, but we stand for what we believe – we don't believe in quantity, we believe in quality. And at the end of the day, if you look at it, after all these years… Do we have a problem in our stomach, are we crazy, why are we always opposing this? Now the world can see why we've been opposing this for 1,300 years. Who would, in their right mind take his family through *hell* just to say that, "You know what, I'm not going to bow down to you. You're wrong, what you're spreading is wrong". Nobody would do that. If you have 70,000 people in front of you and you've got 72 people on your side, and you can hear the drums of war, and you know you're going to get killed. And after everyone gets killed, and you've got your baby in your hand, and they shoot an arrow at your baby, and slaughter your children in front of you, and you still say: "No, you're wrong". Nobody does that in their right mind; that means there must be something there. (Interview 6)

Not only does the interviewee construct a coherent historical narrative that inscribes the Karbala paradigm onto the contemporary context ("we've been opposing this[88] for 1,300 years"), he also draws on the historical memory of Karbala to justify Shi'a moral authority in the face of Sunni aggression ("we stand for what we believe"). The language used here is particularly interesting, with the constant repetition of "right" and "wrong" working to discursively construct a Shi'a-specific ethics of victimhood and struggle against oppression. In this way, it is possible to see how the historical transformation of Shi'a theology from founding mythology to revolutionary project forms a crucial role in contemporary articulations of the Shi'a subject. Without the re-imagination of Shi'a Islamic history undertaken by twentieth-century scholars, the Shi'a subject would be a

[88] Interestingly, the interviewee never adequately defines what "this" is, but rather constructs it as a straw man to contrast with his discursive articulation of Shi'a moral authority.

religious subject tout court – it is the Karbala paradigm that has turned the Shi'a subject from passive victim into a mobilising narrative of emancipation and revolutionary struggle.

Embodying Shi'ism: Ritual, Mourning, and the Shi'a Subject

While such articulations of the Shi'a subject can be seen as undergirding a Shi'a-specific ethics of victimhood and emancipation, Shi'a religious rituals similarly offer the opportunity for individuals to engage with and define what it means to be "Shi'a" in the contemporary moment. Ritual practices can therefore be understood as performative enactments of religious identity (as defined by the contours of the Shi'a subject) in the Butlerian sense, simultaneously appealing to and calling into being the very identity category they claim to represent (Butler, 1988, 2011a, 2011b). To engage in Shi'a religious rituals is, to some degree, to mark oneself and one's body as *being Shi'a*, at the same time as the enactment of the ritual itself comes to define the boundaries of the identity category of "Shi'aness".

The channelling, moulding, and directing of bodies, minds, and voices inherent in Shi'a ritualistic performance all contribute to materially produce the collectively articulated Shi'a subject they claim to represent. In this sense, the ritualistic practices of Shi'a religious observance emerge as an aspect of performative identity (or rather, of the re-iterations of failed identification) that can be perceived, experienced, and analysed through their aesthetic and affective practices and that, in turn, come to constitute the meaning and content of the Shi'a subject thus performed. In particular, the mourning and commemorative rituals associated with 'Ashura and Muharram – themselves implicated in the transformative potential of the Karbala paradigm – work to discursively construct a Shi'a subject that is simultaneously invested in the historical invocation of Shi'a moral authority and the articulation of this authority within the contemporary context.

The inscription of Shi'a identity through bodily performances is especially evident in the emphasis placed on physicality during the 'Ashura rituals, as manifested in practices of mourning and commemoration such as crying, wearing black, and stylised forms of self-flagellation. These practices are mostly performed in the pre-scripted social setting of the *majlis* (religious gathering, pl. *majalis*), and are regulated and enforced both by top-down directives imposed by scholarly authority and by informal policing by individuals and collectives. The emotional and affective resonance of the 'Ashura rituals are especially pertinent, as the communal participation in acts of mourning and commemoration works to produce a collective sense of what it means to be "Shi'a" through the performative enactment of the Karbala paradigm. As one of my interviewees put it: "Shi'is gather in pain and in the feeling of sadness, which brings people together more than humour. Shi'ism is not just a community, it's a way of life; there's a pull, an emotional attachment there" (Interview 21).

Crying – the physical shedding of tears and outpouring of emotion – is a key component of 'Ashura commemorations. In Shi'a theology, the shedding of tears for the Ahl al-Bayt is seen as an expression of religious commitment, a visible manifestation of Shi'a belief. Interestingly, however, in the *majalis* I attended, it was almost exclusively the older generation who displayed the greatest levels of emotion, often wailing and screaming in marked contrast to the silent tears and bowed heads of the younger women. Indeed, as one young British-born Iraqi explained, she found the emotive pull of the story to depend in part on the skill of the reciter, and wasn't always able to physically summon tears. "If I can't cry I just hide my face and pretend."[89] The invocation of pretence is particularly interesting here, as it suggests a certain degree of self- and other-regulation with regards to the ritualised practice of crying, and that there may be social stigma attached to the

[89] Informal interview with K, 28 October 2014

absence of tears in the ritual setting. Similarly, one young man told me that he felt too much emphasis was placed on the shedding of tears during 'Ashura and that it detracted from people's true spirituality: "I don't understand why people cry; these guys died thousands of years ago [sic]."[90] In this way, the embodied practice of crying has itself become a battleground for the negotiation of Shi'a religiosity, and the types of Shi'a subject such religiosity engenders.

Throughout my fieldwork, I encountered numerous altercations between the older and younger generation, especially when it came to the "correct" way to perform or enact Shi'a religious rituals – I even witnessed an argument between two women in which the elder emphatically told the younger that "'Ashura is for children," thus undermining the young woman's attempt to negotiate her "Shi'aness" (author's fieldnotes, 3 November 2015). Indeed, the older generation often expressed puzzlement regarding the younger generation's enactment of their faith; one man noted ruefully that he felt the second generation to be "on another wavelength" (Interview 31), while another remarked that the younger generation "take the worst of religion" (Interview 7). Conversely, the younger generation expressed a more ambivalent relationship regarding their national and ethnic origins – as one young woman explained: "I think more people associate themselves as being British Shi'a than being British-Iraqi Shi'a. We've kind of created our own culture" (Interview 28).

Such examples point to a wider discursive shift in which the identity category of "Shi'a" is becoming decoupled from a national identification with Iraqi origins, and instead takes on its own meaning as an expression of a marginalised minority religious sect invested in the moblising narrative of the Karbala paradigm. Moreover, the historical and political precedent of the Battle of Karbala is increasingly being invoked in the contemporary

[90] Informal interview with A, 11 October 2014

context as a way to make specific claims regarding the nature and content of the category "Shi'a". In recent years, the discursive moral authority of the Shi'a subject provided by the Karbala paradigm has been further augmented by the rise of sectarian politics in the Middle East, and in particular as a result of the enduring threat represented by ISIS.

"ISIS are the Yazid of Today"

> If the Brigades of Abu Fadhil made them
> Run from Sham and only God can save them
> Running towards Abu Fadhil so tell them
> ISIS you ran in the wrong direction
> (Author fieldnotes, 29 October 2015)

These are the lyrics from the first verse of an English-language *latmiyya* (recitation) entitled "ISIS You Ran in the Wrong Direction" and performed on the seventh night of 'Ashura 2015 at the Islamic Centre of England, as part of a majlis organised by the Centre's youth movement Ahlulbayt Islamic Mission (AIM). The lyrics combine historical references to the Battle of Karbala (via the invocation of the figure of Abu Fadhil, a respectful term for Imam Hussain's half-brother Abbas) with the contemporary politics of the Middle East (via the reference to ISIS), and provide an interesting exemplar of the way in which the Karbala paradigm is being reinterpreted in the contemporary diasporic context to undergird particular iterations of the diasporic Shi'a subject. In particular, the juxtaposition of Shi'a iconography with contemporary sectarian politics serves to place this particular *latmiyya* within a wider politico-religious paradigm in which current political conflicts are invested with historical transgressions; thus transforming ISIS from a specifically modern phenomenon based on the convergence of contemporary and

contingent factors into a wider transcendental force that encapsulates the victimisation and vilification of Shi'ism throughout history.

In this sense, the term "ISIS" here functions as a straw man; an empty signifier in the diasporic imaginary constitutive of a particular type of Shi'a subject. Indeed, since the fall of Mosul in June 2014 to ISIS forces, the self-declared "caliphate" has come, in Shi'a discourse, to represent the same forces of "evil" that fought and killed Imam Hussain on the battlefields of Karbala. As one of my interviewees put it, speaking about the rise of ISIS in Iraq:

> These are the same people whose forefathers killed Imam Hussain… It is the same people who fought the Prophet. It's the same people who tried to do all these bad things in the world, you see them today. History repeats itself. It's an ideology, and the problem is that now it's become apparent to the whole world that's it uh… you know, it's a flawed ideology. That they don't know what to do anymore. Even the Sunnis, between me and you, they've realised that their ideology and what they believe in is a pathway to ISIS. Because it's flawed. (Interview 6)

In other words, the representation of ISIS as the spectral embodiment of "evil" simultaneously invokes the Karbala paradigm as a politico-religious narrative of Shi'a victimisation and emancipation, as well as implicating localised practices of Shi'ism in wider sectarian politics that pits the essentialised categories of "Sunnis" and "Shi'is" in an eternal conflict of "us and them". Undoubtedly, the invocation of "ISIS" holds greater resonance in the context of diasporic London, where the UK media have contributed to the demonisation of (Sunni) Muslim militancy and cultivated a besieged mentality that pits the "liberal" and "enlightened" West against the "barbaric" and "medieval" threat of

radical Islamist terrorism (Aretxaga, 2000; Feldman, 2012; Nacos, 2016; Stern and Berger, 2015; Weiss and Hassan, 2016). In Western media reporting, the discourse of "Islamic terrorism", most recently through the invocation of ISIS, thus functions as a primary marker of in- and out-group identity. As Jackson outlines:

> [T]he terrorism discourse – the terms, assumptions, labels, categories and narratives used to describe and explain terrorism – has emerged as one of the most important political discourses of the modern era, alongside climate change, human rights, global poverty and arms proliferation. As a term of elite and popular discourse, terrorism has come to possess clearly observable ideographic qualities. That is, like "freedom", "democracy" and "justice", "terrorism" now functions as a primary term for the central narratives of the culture, employed in political debate and daily conversation, but largely unquestioned in its meaning and usage. (Jackson, 2007: 394)

In other words, the localised politics of Shi'a-Sunni sectarianism in the Middle East have been re-appropriated and transformed in the diasporic space into a narrative of victimhood and political emancipation through a combination of the revolutionary force of the Karbala paradigm and the contemporary discursive vilification of (Sunni) Islamist militancy. Indeed, one of the narratives I frequently encountered during my fieldwork among practicing Shi'is was the assertion that they were not "that kind" of Muslim; an implicit reference to the current political climate in the UK and wider Western world where to be "Muslim" is seen as an ambivalent and problematic positioning in relation to wider non-Muslim society.

Perhaps the most evident manifestation of attempts to claim and define the discursive place of Shi'a Islam in Europe and the West is in the annual 'Ashura and Arba'een

marches that take place in central London on the tenth and fortieth day of Muharram respectively. Beginning at Marble Arch and progressing through Hyde Park (although for the last two years the 'Ashura march has moved to go up Edgware Rd), the marches draw thousands of devout Shi'is from various backgrounds onto the streets and avenues of central London to profess their faith and to mourn the killing of Imam Hussain. These marches manifest aesthetically as a mass of black-swathed[91] bodies and large, Arabic-inscribed banners, punctuated with the melodic cadences of *latmiyyat* in various languages and the rhythmical beating of bodies and drums. Alongside the religious banners, the national flags of Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Kurdistan, Bahrain, and a host of other nations can be seen (as well as the flags of Shi'a religious and political parties such as Hezbollah), along with various smaller placards and banners bearing religious and political slogans in English such as: "Genocide committed to those who stood against tyranny"; and "Every land is Karbala and every day is 'Ashura" (a slogan made popular by Imam Khomeini during Iran's Islamic revolution).

For the past two years, alongside such slogans of Shi'a doctrinal ideology, a sea of black signs inscribed with red and white letters have proclaimed "Down with ISIS", or alternatively "ISIS are the Yazid of today", and even "Shi'a Muslims are the biggest victims of terrorism". Such public and visible articulations of Shi'a religious and sectarian identity in explicit opposition to the politics and practises of ISIS draw on contemporary social and media tropes of Islamism and terrorism to articulate an unequivocally *Shi'a* political and religious message. As in the private invocations of ISIS-as-evil as a mechanism through which to inscribe the Karbala paradigm on contemporary political conflicts, the public contrasting of "Shi'a-as-victim" with "Sunni[/ISIS]-as-oppressor" constructs an explicitly sectarian narrative as a way to make specific claims regarding the political place of Shi'ism in the contemporary world. In this way, the marches are

[91] Black being the colour of mourning to commemorate the death of Imam Hussain and his family.

seen as a way of publically and visibly claiming a politically-invested manifestation of Shi'a religious identity, couched in the language of international justice and minority rights. As one young British-born Iraqi Shi'i put it: "It's good to show that we're not just a minority oppressed group, that we have a presence… that we have a voice" (author interview with Maryam A, 30 October 2015). Another woman I walked alongside during the 2014 'Ashura march told me that: "We want people to stop and asks us what it's about. That's the whole point."[92]

In contrast to the internally-oriented aesthetics and ritual practices of the Muharram *majalis*, the 'Ashura and Arba'een marches are specifically targeted at those *external* to the British Shi'a community; those who may not even have any previous exposure to Islam or to Shi'ism (Spellman-Poots, 2012). In particular, the foregrounding of Shi'a victimhood through the invocation of the Karbala paradigm is used as a way to tie Shi'a religious identity to contemporary sectarian politics in the Middle East and elsewhere and to make a claim for the politically emancipatory role of Shi'ism.[93] Moreover, such articulations of Shi'a politico-religious identity eschew the particular ethno-national origins of different Shi'is and instead seek to construct a unitary transnational and trans-ethnic Shi'a subject invested in constructing a form of "European Shi'ism" (van den Bos, 2012) as a foil to the demonistation of Islamic "terrorism" in the Western media. Take the following conversation, held on Whatsapp between V, a British-born Iraqi Shi'a woman, and M, a Syrian Shi'a man who came to England as a child, regarding the 2014 'Ashura march:

M: It's time to English-ify [sic] our slogans and banners

[92] Private conversation with SM during the 2014 London 'Ashura march
[93] The politically emancipatory role of Shi'ism, especially through the invocation of "Shi'a Rights", is explored further in Chapter 4.

V: I agree to an extent, but I think it's good to have a few because it teaches non-Muslims to differentiate rather than assume any Arabic flag is ISIS

M: It's definitely important to have a few Arabic banners or slogans to normalise that Arabic isn't linked to terrorism, but not in the current climate. The average somebody walking by in the street will see a load of Muslim-looking people wearing all black, shouting passionate Arabic slogans waving big black flags with white writing on them. Now the most recent image similar to that the average Brit has seen is ISIS militants. So we're not exactly giving off the best impression.

V: The current climate is why it needs to be emphasised… people are going to jump to conclusions with or without the flags… It's not about the number of flags or chants, it's about getting the message across in the most efficient way and that's by talking to people and handing out leaflets, whether you're holding an English flag or an Arabic one.

(Author fieldnotes, 4 November 2014)

This exchange demonstrates an acute awareness both of the potential reception of non-Muslims to "a load of Muslim-looking people wearing all black" and of the current political and social climate that has served to make "ISIS" a salient marker of "bad" Muslim identity against which these young Shi'is explicitly want to position themselves. Despite disagreeing on the specific mechanisms by which to do so, both are in agreement about the importance of "getting the message across" and of visibly manifesting their commitment to Shi'a politico-religious ideology. In this sense, the spectre of "ISIS" is invoked firstly to make claims regarding the moral authority of the Shi'a subject as one of victimhood and emancipation and secondly, to place such claims within the broader political and social context of the Shi'a diaspora. As one elderly Iraqi man put it when I

inquired as to why so many people had decided to take part in the 2014 march: "They are here because of ISIS."[94]

Conclusion

This chapter has traced the ways in which iterations of the identity-category "Shi'a" have changed across time and contexts, and in its contemporary articulation combines elements of Shi'a religious piety, political emancipation, and current sectarian tensions in the Middle East. In particular, the emphasis has been on documenting the varying forms of Shi'a subjectivity cultivated in relation to the religious authority of the clerical establishment, the symbolic and political power of Iran as the archetypal "Big Shi'a", and the mobilising and transformative potential of the Karbala paradigm. In the context of the diasporic imaginary, where invocations of (Sunni) Islamic "terrorism" as embodied in the spectre of "ISIS" undergird a Shi'a-specific ethics of victimhood and moral authority that is nevertheless geared towards an external, non-Muslim, audience, the sectarianisation of the contemporary Shi'a subject can be understood as a product of such ideological, political, and social convergences.

Moreover, this sectarianised Shi'a subject is itself increasingly inscribed onto transnational and trans-ethnic conceptions of Shi'a identity in ways that replicate the globalisation of other forms of minority identity category in the contemporary world (more on this in chapters 4 and 5). Coupled with the argument presented in Chapter 1, the political, historical, social, and theological context of the identity-category "Shi'a" presented in this chapter contributes to an understanding of the diasporic (Iraqi-)Shi'a subject that sees it as part of a wider shift away from nationalistic forms of identification and towards globalised understandings of what it means to "be Shi'a" in the contemporary world.

[94] Informal conversation with Abu Z, 4 November 2014.

While chapters 1 and 2 have thus focused on the historical and discursive architectures underpinning the formation of the sectarianised (Iraqi-)Shi'a diasporic subject, neither has explicitly explored the significance of the material setting of London and wider political and social milieu of Britain in producing and sustaining certain iterations of this subject within the context of diaspora and exile. This is the project of Chapter 3, which provides an embedded understanding of the ways in which the material and symbolic environment of diasporic London has proved fundamental in shaping a particular form of Shi'a subjectivity.

Chapter 3 – "Najaf in Brent": Being (Iraqi-)Shi'a in London

Introduction

Thus far, the first two chapters of this thesis have focused on exploring the various historical and political contours underpinning the emergence of a sectarianised diasporic (Iraqi-)Shi'a subject by examining in turn the content and meaning of the identity categories "Iraqi" and "Shi'a" across time and space. In particular, the focus has been on the shift away from national orientations and towards a transnational and trans-ethnic understanding of the Shi'a subject (a subject that is, by definition *sectarian* through its prioritisation of Shi'a ethno-religious identity). In this chapter, I turn to the context of diasporic London in order to understand the ways in which the encounter with the British social and political context has been formative in shaping the contours of the sectarianised Shi'a subject – in other words, to what makes this subject *diasporic*. The focus on London is significant since, as outlined in the Introduction, the city represents the focal point of Shi'a activity in the UK, both in terms of demographics and in terms of political and religious institutions.

Part of this inquiry will involve briefly sketching the relationship between (Shi'a) Islam and the British state, as well as tracing the ways in which diasporic engagement with and within the urban fabric of London has come to shape the subjective encounters of (Iraqi) Shi'is within the city. Crucially, I argue that the British government's implementation of multiculturalism founded on a logic of ethnonormativity has been influential in defining the types of ethnic, religious, and political subjectivities available to diasporic (Iraqi) Shi'is, while the social context of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment post 9/11 has contributed to the emergence of a Shi'a-specific ethics of victimhood and identification, often defined in opposition to "radical" Sunni Islam. Indeed, the significance of the 1991

Gulf War and 2003 invasion of Iraq within the British social context arguably contributed both to the problematisation of the identity categories "Iraqi" and "Arab" at the same time as they catapulted intra-communal tensions within Islam into the wider British imaginary (Aly, 2015). In this way, the initial shift from nationalistic ("Iraqi") to sectarian ("Shi'a") forms of identification first outlined in Chapter 1 came to bear fruit within the diasporic context as a result of the alignment of various political and social factors through which a *sectarianised* and *diasporic Shi'a subject* has been able to emerge. In other words, the sectarianisation of the contemporary (Iraqi-)Shi'a subject is not only a product of the experiences of exile and diaspora, it is also intimately linked to the promotion of certain forms of minority ethno-religious identity categories within the British context.

The first part of this chapter will focus on the political and social milieu of Britain in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, particularly the rise of multiculturalism as a way of defining and policing immigrant communities. The emphasis on "difference" required by the multiculturalism project plausibly resulted not only in the discursive construction of a patchwork of ethnic and religious "communities", it fostered the active division of space and resources along such arbitrarily drawn communal lines. Moreover, set against the backdrop of rising Islamophobia in the UK in response to the perceived threat of Islamist militancy since 2001, such policies have nurtured a sense of in- and out-group solidarity necessary for the crystallisation of communal identity boundaries productive of the sectarianised Shi'a subject.

The UK government's active promotion of communal interests along ethno-religious lines can also be seen reflected in the urban fabric of London (the most significant metropolitan centre for Shi'a Muslims in the UK), where the fragmentation of space has led to the creation of what has been dubbed the "Shi'a triangle" within the northwestern

borough of Brent. In this way, the the material diversification of different Shi'a religious establishments within London has led to a fragmentation of the city-as-lived, in which the vast majority of practising Shi'is engage with only small isolated pockets of the urban environment on a daily basis. Moreover, the growing number of specifically Shi'a schools, charities, religious institutions, and community centres has resulted in what I call the "sectarianisation" of space in Brent, in which individuals hailing from different branches of Islam inhabit different spaces within the city despite often living in close proximity to each other. This "sectarianisation" of space thus forms part of the wider shift away from nationalist or ethnic identity categories of belonging and towards a trans-ethnic and globalised notion of "Shi'aness" documented in Chapters 1 and 2. In this sense, the physical carving-up of the city is reflective not merely of micro-level practices and lived experience, but also of transnational political and socio-economic trends, including the influence of the Shi'a clerical establishment and the political significance of Sunni-Shi'a sectarianism in countries such as Iraq.

In the final part of the chapter, I turn to the contemporary experiences of young British-born Shi'is, especially with regards to the increasing glossing over of ethnic and national origins in favour of an orientation towards a trans-ethnic notion of "Shi'aness" that is itself intimately tied to the British domestic context. Unlike first-generation diasporans, who often harbour strong emotional and affective ties to their countries of origin, the growing population of British-born Shi'is are actively involved in reinventing what it means to be both "British" *and* "Shi'a" in the contemporary context. In particular, the rise of English-language religious organisations and programmes point both to the diversification and distillation of Shi'a (ethno-)religious identity in Britain. It is this transformation of what it means to be "Shi'a" across ethnic and national boundaries and within the context of modern Britain that makes the sectarianised (Iraqi-)Shi'a subject a *diasporic* subject.

(Shi'a) Islam in the UK: Constructing a "Community"

The advent of a religiously-inflected Muslim political agency in Europe has widely been understood as an unwitting consequence of the multicultural policies pursued by various countries in an attempt to deal with a burgeoning immigrant population (Aly 2015; Cesari, 2004; Grewal, 2014; Meer, 2009, 2010; Modood, 2003, 2005, 2007; Ramadan, 2002; Roy, 2004; among others). This is nowhere more true than in Britain where, in the words of Tariq Modood (2005: 12), "Muslim identity is seen as the illegitimate child of British multiculturalism." Recent studies of Muslim political identity in the British context have productively drawn out the parallels between Muslim civic and political rights movements and the political claims made by gender and race activists (Modood, 2005), and emphasised the role of liberal ideas of equality, human rights, and multiculturalism in shaping Muslim political consciousness (Meer, 2010). In particular, studies have highlighted the trend towards the racialisation of Islam as a primary marker of identity, in which the term "Muslim" has come to function "effectively as an ethno-religious category in the West" (Bloul, 2008: 7).

There exists a wide-ranging and pre-existing literature that productively traces the various ways in which the political logic and practical policies of multiculturalism have led to the emergence of an ethnicised and racialised Muslim political identity both in Britain and in Europe as a whole (Aly 2015; Cesari, 2004; Grewal, 2014; Haddad, 2002; Meer, 2009, 2010; Modood, 2003, 2005, 2007; Morey 2010a, 2010b; Ramadan, 2002; Roy, 2004; Triandafyllidou et al, 2006, 2012). However, it is my contention that while such studies have done an excellent job of illuminating the contemporary politics of Muslim minority political consciousness in Britain and elsewhere, there has often been very little exploration (beyond a cursory acknowledgement) of the heterogeneity and diversity within Islam itself, and especially of the various ideological, theological, political, and sectarian divisions within immigrant Muslim populations. In particular,

despite the growing interest in Shi'a minority groups in Europe (as exemplified by the works of scholars such as Flynn, 2013; Gholami, 2014; Ridgeon, 2012; Scharbrodt, 2011, 2017; Shanneik, 2014, 2015; Spellman, 2004; Spellman-Poots, 2012; van den Bos, 2011; among others), the majority of these works tend to progress from an Islamic studies or anthropological framework in which the emphasis is on religious ritual and practice and not on forms of political mobilisation and/or consciousness that are developing amongst Shi'a communities as a result of the encounter with European social and political contexts. This chapter intends to go some way in filling this empirical and conceptual gap by focusing on the fracturing of Muslim political consciousness in Britain along sectarian lines and the rise of an explicitly *Shi'a* politico-ethno-religious identity.

Ethnonormativity and Multiculturalism

Although the term "multiculturalism" has come to acquire a whole host of alternative, and sometimes contradictory, meanings – leading some to dub it a "*portemanteau* term for anything from minority discourse to postcolonial critique" (Bhabha, 1996: 55) – within the context of European politics, multiculturalism is most often used to refer to the claims made by post-immigration minority groups on the state (Modood, 2007). It is this latter meaning that serves as the starting point for the discussion here, in which multiculturalism is taken to mean "the political accommodation by the state and/or a dominant group of all minority cultures *defined first and foremost by reference to race, ethnicity, or religion*" (Triandafyllidou et al, 2012: 5; emphasis added). Multiculturalism, in an important sense, is therefore tied up with notions of ethnicity, race, and religion, and especially the apportion of political and/or civic rights to individuals and groups who are seen to belong to such categorisations. It is precisely this injunction to "be ethnic/racial/religious" by the state – in which minority groups only gain rights and recognition by proclaiming their differences – that underlies what I am calling the "ethnonormative" logic of multiculturalism as a discursive producer of marked ethno-

racial identities (cf. Aly, 2015).

While multiculturalism has been variously interpreted and adopted in different European countries, the politics of multiculturalism in Britain has historically been deeply implicated both in the postcolonial legacy of British imperialism and in the black-and-white dualism precipitated by the racial politics of the transatlantic slave trade (Baumann, 1999; Gilroy, 2004; Haddad, 2002; Modood, 2005). Since it is not the purpose of this thesis to go into a historical genealogy of racial politics and immigration in the UK context, it is sufficient to note here that the expression and interpretation of the term "multiculturalism" within British politics has, for historical and political reasons, always been imbued with underlying assumptions regarding the naturalness of categories such as "race", "ethnicity" and "culture". As Baumann notes:

> Britain's political culture encourages so-called minorities to strive for emancipation as if they were sports teams: They are approached as so-called "communities", and politicians, the media and almost everybody else sees them as tightly knit "cultural groups" held together by the same traditions, value systems, and history. It is perfectly clear that this is not true; but this is the misperception under which they must hope to achieve civil emancipation (1999: 76)

Within the British context, in other words, in order for a minority group to receive political and civic recognition by the state, there is a requirement to demonstrate and perform ethno-cultural "difference"; even when such performances lead to the reification of problematic categories of group boundaries and "identities". It is the implication of British policies and practices of multiculturalism within a framework of "ethnic governmentality" (Aly, 2015: 30) that has arguably led to the pervasiveness of an

ethnonormative logic when it comes to the representation and rights of minority groups in Britain.

The term "ethnonormativity", a reformulation of the notion of heteronormativity taken from the literature on gender studies and critical feminism (most notably the work of Judith Butler), is used here to refer to "a deeply embedded set of beliefs about essential sameness and difference that naturalise the notion of 'ethnicity' and provide it with the status of a proper (ontological) object" (Aly, 2015: 199). In this sense, I use the concept of ethnonormativity to refer to the reification and naturalisation of posited "ethno-religious identities". Ethnonormativity thus not only refers to the foregrounding of ethnic and cultural categories of belonging and identification, but also to the "process of differentiation – which is also heavily marked by racial and cultural value judgments" – through which such categories come to be intelligible in the first place (Morey, 2010a: 531).

As a product of social and political discourse, ethnonormativity thus works as a form of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1991) that serves to both produce and render intelligible the ethnic and cultural identities it seeks to police. Multiculturalism, by operating within the framework of such an ethnonormative logic, is therefore complicit in the production and reification of ethno-cultural categories through the institutionalisation of modes of civic and political representation and belonging along "ethnic" lines (Aly, 2015; Baumann, 1999; Bloul, 2008; Lentin, 2012; Modood, 2005; Morey 2010b; Triandafyllidou et al, 2006, 2012). Under this understanding, the ethnonormative logic of multicultural policies do not merely interpolate pre-existing ethnic, racial, cultural, and religious minority identities, they actively call them into being at the same time as they set the parameters by which individuals and groups are required to be/do/perform ethnicity, race, culture, and religion (or sometimes combinations of the above).

If "ethnic identity" is not predicated on pre-existing ontological premises but is instead a discursive construction embedded in hegemonic power structures, then we can come to see how the emergence of specifically (Shi'a) Muslim ethno-religious identity in Britain is itself a product of the ethnonormative logic of multicultural practices, specifically the injunction to be/do/perform ethnicity, race, and religion. We can see, too, how religion as an identity category has itself come to be racialised and ethnicised as a result of the modes of political participation and recognition required by multiculturalism that are predicated on the existence of such discrete markers of difference. As Nasar Meer astutely notes in his work tracing the advent of what he calls "Muslim-consciousness" in Britain, there has been a "genealogical shift from race to the emergence of religion as a salient marker of difference in specifically understanding how expressions of British-Muslim identity have developed" (2010: 55). More specifically, such forms of Muslim political and civic identity can be understood as "quasi-ethnic sociological formation[s]" (ibid: 62), which are themselves discursive products of the ethnonormative logic of multicultural discourses that come to "impinge upon the sorts of consciousnesses minorities develop for themselves" (ibid: 200).

Securitising "British Islam"

In the context of multicultural London, where diasporic Muslims from different ethnic, cultural, national, and socio-economic backgrounds increasingly come together within the parameters of religiously-defined spaces, it is possible to see how a communal sense of "Muslim identity" has ben able to crystallise as a result of cross-pollination amongst hitherto separate communities. On the other hand, from the perspective of wider (non-Islamic) British society, to whom Islam often appears as a foreign import, differences between Muslims from diverse national or ethno-cultural backgrounds are often glossed over while their "Muslimness" is emphasised as an expression of difference. As Aly

(2015: 208) states: "European Muslims have increasingly come to be understood *qua* Muslims, with this aspect of their 'identity' viewed as trumping others." Moreover, such conceptions of a unified "Muslim identity" in Britain have become increasingly securitised and problematised as a result of the UK government's focus on counter-terrorism policies post 9/11. But how do such understanding of a communal "British Islam" – itself a product both of the material encounter of Muslims from different immigrant backgrounds and the ethnonormative logic of multiculturalism discourses that made "Islam" a salient category of identity – come to be tempered by inter-sectarian divisions within Islam itself? This is an especially pertinent question in light of a growing anti-Muslim sentiment within Britain, as well as increasing intra-communal tensions as a result of violent sectarian conflicts in countries such as Syria and Iraq.

Since the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York on 11 September 2011 and the London bombings on 7 July 2005, the British government has engaged in a number of counter-terrorism initiatives and policies in order to combat the threat of home-grown Islamist radicalism in the UK. One of the most significant of these policies is the Prevent strategy, which forms part of the government's CONTEST counter-terrorism initiative (the other strands are Prepare, Protect, and Pursue). Created by the Labour government under Tony Blair in 2003, Prevent's remit was widened in 2011 under Conservative prime minister David Cameron to cover all forms of extremism (Carlile, 2011; Home Office, 2011); however, there remains a widespread perception that the policy disproportionately targets Muslims (Heath-Kelly, 2012; HM Government, 2011; Richards, 2010; Thomas, 2010). Moreover, against the background of British ethnonormativity and multiculturalism, Prevent's focus on Muslims and Islamic extremism has effectively fostered a "monocultural focus [that] has been a vehicle for surveillance and intelligence" that has resulted in "enforcing the otherness of Muslim communities" (Thomas, 2010: 446–447).

For example, in a 2015 article in *The Muslim News* (a publication run by Shi'a Khojas in London) the author accuses the Prevent strategy of "misappropriate[ing] the language of safeguarding while marginalising and stigmatising both Muslim parents and children… How much confidence can the Muslim community have in Prevent when serious abuses are being reported already?" (Birt, 2015). Indeed, within the context of British discourses of multiculturalism and ethnonormativity, there is a strong sense in which ""[c]ounter-terrorism measures are contributing to a wider sense among Muslims that they are being treated as a 'suspect community' and targeted by authorities simply because of their religion" (Choudhury and Fenwick, 2011: 11).

In this way, policies such as Prevent have not only led to the problematisation of Muslim identity in the UK by labelling Muslims as a "suspect community" (Pantazis and Pemberton, 2009), but they have effectively worked to construct a cohesive sense of "Muslim identity" in Britain that glosses over the heterogeneity inherent within Islam itself and British Muslims in particular. As Awan argues, "state measures to prevent extremism have created an element of racial profiling of certain sections and factions within the Muslim community" such that *all* Muslims come to be seen within the same (pejorative and securitised) framework (Awan, 2012: 1165). Specifically, this is a framework based on a particular discursive construction of radicalised Islam, often based on the (Sunni) Salafi or Wahhabi traditions (with elements of cultural reductionism thrown in for good measure): women in *niqabs*, men with long beards, gender segregation, female genital mutilation, etc. In other words, the combination of British government policies of multiculturalism, ethnonormativity, and counter-terrorism, coupled with the demonisation of Islam by the mainstream media, has created a pervasive Orientalist discourse (cf. Said, 2003) through which "Muslims are

homogenised as backwards, irrational, unchanging, fundamentalist, misogynist, threatening, [and] manipulative" (Poole, 2002: 18).

This homogenising of Muslim experience and identity within the British context is problematic for at least two reasons. Firstly, it constructs "Muslimness" as a coherent and unproblematic identity category that is conceived of as inherently antagonistic to wider (non-Muslim) British society, without ever actually exploring the ways in which individual Muslims engage with this identity category. Secondly, it ignores the heterogeneity of British Muslim experience such that to articulate an orientation towards "Islam" becomes analogous with expressing support or condoning one specific version of radicalised and militant Islam. The practicing British Muslim is thus caught in a bind between attempting to promote a positive Muslim identity at the same time as seeking to distance themselves from the pejorative conceptions of Islam that permeate wider society. This is especially pertinent for self-identifying Muslims who represent minority branches of the religion, rather than the dominant Sunni/Salafi/Wahhabi version portrayed in the tabloid press.

"We're not that *kind of Muslim"*

For Iraqi Shi'is in the UK, there are a number of reasons why individuals might not feel part of a wider community of "British Islam" (and not merely due to the negative construction of Muslims within wider British discourse). Firstly, the vast majority of Muslims in Britain tend to come from South Asian backgrounds (mostly from India or Pakistan) and predominantly came to the UK as economic migrants. Moreover, just as in the wider Islamic world, Sunni Muslims make up between 85-90 per cent of all Muslims in the UK (Abbas, 2007; Hopkins and Gale, 2009; Meer and Modood, 2009; Spellman-Poots, 2012), thus dominating the Islamic religious and cultural scene. Demographically speaking, therefore, there are significant differences between the vast majority of

working-class, South Asian, Sunni Muslims in Britain and the mostly middle-class, Arab, Shi'a Muslims (notwithstanding the political and ideological divisions between different schools of Sunni and Shi'a Islam).[95] Against the background of what one interviewee called "anti-Muslim propaganda" (Interview 25), many Shi'a Muslims feel both misrepresented and misunderstood by conceptions of "Islam" propagated by the British media and wider society. As one young Iraqi Shi'a woman put it: "I think there's a lot of cultural practices that Shi'is do that [people] don't understand… I feel that [people] misunderstand what Shi'is are."[96] Another young Iraqi Shi'a woman who came to the UK as a child, expressed her belief that Shi'is needed to be more assertive in distinguishing themselves from other Muslims in the UK: "The Shi'a are all silent. You always hear about 'Muslims', but they're inevitably [South] Asian and Sunni; you never hear about Shi'is or Iraqis – we don't have a voice. We need to show people that it's not us that do all these crazy things."[97]

This desire for Shi'is to distance themselves from the wider (Sunni) Muslim community was something I repeatedly came across during my fieldwork – there was an enduring sense that "we are not *that* kind of Muslim"; although the meaning and resonance of this phrase often changed across time and contexts. In particular, a number of my research participants highlighted the rise of Islamist terrorism post-9/11 and the prevalence of Wahhabi and Salafi brands of Islam within Britain as a way to stress their alleged difference from "those kinds of Muslims". Consider the following excerpt from an interview with a young British-born Iraqi Shi'a man discussing how he feels uncomfortable walking down Edgware Road in London due to the large numbers of Sunni Muslims there:

[95] It should be noted that Khojas – Shi'a Muslims from Africa of South Asian origin – also make up a considerable proportion of Shi'is in the UK. However, like their Arab co-religionists, Khojas mostly come from higher socio-economic backgrounds than South Asian Sunnis.
[96] Informal conversation with HA, 4 June 2015.
[97] Informal conversation with NM, 16 August 2015.

A: You see all these beardy-weirdys with their mini-skirts and their –

EDE: What are beardy-weirdys?

A: The weirdos with beards. I feel uncomfortable.

EDE: You have a beard.

A: Yeah but I'm not like… my beard is not filthy like their beards. I don't wear those mini-skirts with Reebok classics [laughs]. Do you know what I mean? It's become… you know, sometimes I get, I feel uncomfortable walking there.

(Interview 6)

Here, the comments regarding "beardy-weirdys" (a pejorative reference to the Salafi style of wearing a long beard and shaving the moustache) and "mini-skirts" (referring to the *thobe*, a kind of short robe worn by Salafis) work to mark the speaker as being different to the (Sunni) Muslims he is describing – even though he himself sports a beard.

This emphasis on difference was often attributed by the Shi'is I encountered to be a result of the rise of Salafi and Wahhabi branches of Islam in the UK, and especially the geopolitical influence of the Gulf States such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar. As one young Iranian Shi'a man who volunteered at the Al-Khoei Centre told me: "all of this hate, even ISIS, where is it coming from? It's coming from Saudi Arabia."[98] In particular, the growing profile of what my interviewees called "*takfirism*" – extreme interpretations of Sunni Islam that consider Shi'a Muslims (as well as Jews and Christians) to be *kafir* ("heretics") – has fostered a sense of Shi'a difference and victimhood. For example, in an interview with the BBC published on 6 March 2015, one young British-born Shi'a woman proclaimed that: "If you have a green bracelet or anything that shows you are Shi'a, they [Sunnis] look at you as if you are not even Muslim, or you don't exist" (Wyatt, 2015).

[98] Informal conversation with PT, 22 June 2015.

Interestingly, in such iterations, the nuances and differences within Sunni Islam itself are glossed over and the signifier "Sunni Muslims" is unproblematically constructed as a homogeneous ethno-religious category that represents the other of "Shi'a Islam". As one young Sunni man commented within the same BBC article: "We've constructed the idea that they [Shi'a Muslims] are 'other' to us, and I think to an extent both parties are to blame" (ibid).

While the growing influence of extremist interpretations of Sunni Islam within the UK have certainly contributed to an enduring sense of Shi'a difference and victimhood (Scharbrodt, 2011), there is also an important respect in which geopolitical conflicts in the Middle East and wider Islamic world have also fostered intra-communal Sunni-Shi'a antagonism within the diasporic context. In particular, the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, the 1991 Gulf War, the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, and the recent conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, have all nurtured different ideas of what it means to be "Sunni" and "Shi'a" Muslim in the contemporary world. These conflicts proved to be significant points of both rupture and convergence in the diasporic experience of (Iraqi) Shi'is in Britain. As Aly (2015: 71) highlights with regards to the 1991 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and subsequent US response: "The Gulf War did not simply happen in a distant, dusty and forbidding Middle East, it was also played out in the daily lives of young people in London."

For Iraqi Shi'is living in exile, the 1991 Gulf War and 2003 invasion of Iraq in particular represented two points of discursive rupture when it came to their self-identification with what it meant to be "Iraqi" within the diasporic context. While I have already highlighted the significance of the 2003 Iraq War and ensuing sectarian conflict in shaping diasporic orientations towards Iraq in Chapter 1, within the UK domestic context both 1991 and 2003 contributed to discursive constructions of "Iraqiness" as something

pejorative and potentially threatening to wider British society. As one of my research participants noted ruefully: "Iraq is the new black";[99] while Aly (2015: 74) describes how many Iraqis were labelled "Arab pigs" in the British tabloid press during the early 1990s. In other words, to identify as "Iraqi" or "Arab" has become politically charged within the context of contemporary Britain as a result of conflicts in the Middle East. The political resonance of Iraqi national identification was thus rendered problematic in the diasporic setting; plausibly paving the ground for a shift away from nationalistic and towards religious and sectarian identity categories productive of the diasporic (Iraqi-)Shi'a subject.

Such examples point to the significance not only of the British domestic context, where "Islam" and "Muslims" have become inextricably associated with the threat of militancy and terrorism, but also of the wider geopolitical context in which wars in the Middle East, along with the ongoing power struggle between (Sunni) Saudi Arabia and (Shi'a) Iran, have fostered particular iterations of *Shi'a* Muslim identity in Britain that seek to distance themselves both from securitised depictions of Sunni Islam and from pejorative iterations of Iraqi and Arab national identities. Most recently, with the rise of ISIS and other fundamentalist strands of Sunni Islam, this sense of "Shi'a exceptionalism" has been further augmented, especially as a result of a number of recent attacks specifically targeting Shi'a minorities in the Islamic world (many of which have had significant death tolls). For example, in a press release dated 7 November 2014, the Al-Khoei Foundation made the following statement:

> This Muharram we have seen increased violence perpetuated by extremists against peaceful Shi'a Muslim worshippers who have been commemorating 'Ashura. The justification promoted by these groups for these acts is that Shi'is

[99] Informal conversation with Yassin Alsalam (a.k.a "The Narcicyst"), 25 September 2015.

> are heretics and deserve to be killed… The potential risk to Shi'a institutions in the West, and Europe in particular, is now real and authorities need to be aware and alert to this threat. (Al-Khoei Benevolent Foundation, 2014. Source: Author's fieldnotes)

Such affirmations of Shi'a difference (often predicated on a sense of Shi'a exceptionalism and victimhood – however warranted – that mirrors the logic of the Karbala paradigm explored in the previous chapter) arguably contribute to a fracturing of "Muslim identity" in the UK, in which different practicing Islamic communities inhabit different discursive spaces within wider British discourse. In the context of the "securitisation of Islam" (Cesari, 2009) in Europe post-9/11, it is understandable that Shi'a Muslims, who consider themselves to be "a minority within a minority" (Sachedina, 1994) in Britain, might wish to "emphasise their moderate and integrationist understanding of Islam and appear as outspoken critics of radical and militant expressions of Sunni Islam" (Scharbrodt, 2011: 519).

For (Iraqi) Shi'is in Britain, in other words, the move away from Iraqi or Arab ethno-national identification and towards a Shi'a-specific ethno-religious identity can be understood as direct result of particular power structures and discursive identity constructions operating within the diasporic imaginary – especially the problematisation of both (Sunni) Muslim and Iraqi/Arab identity categories against which the diasporic Shi'a subject seeks to position itself. But the significance of diasporic London in producing this subject is not limited to the various discursive and political power structures operating within contemporary Britain; there is also an important sense in which the physical experience of living within the urban fabric of London itself has come to shape the reality of diasporic (Iraqi) Shi'is in ways that have fostered orientations towards a pan-ethnic and transnational Shi'a subjectivity.

'Najaf in Brent': The Sectarianisation of Space in London

The city as a site of lived experience provides a unique manifestation of the social relations of which it is a part (Foucault, 1991; Harvey, 1989a, 1989b, 2013; Lefebvre, 1991, 1996; Sarkis, 1993; Schmid, 2006; Sibley, 2003). In particular, the cultural and ethnic fabric of the urban environment is both a product of, and productive of specific ethno-cultural notions regarding identity, belonging, self, and other. In so-called "global" cities such as London, the social reality of living in close proximity to difference – whether manifested in terms of class, culture, race, ethnicity, religion, or otherwise – is a key part of the urban landscape, and has profound implications for the forms of political and social subjectivities cultivated within and as a result of such an environment (Adamson and Koinova, 2013; Sassen, 2001). For immigrants and minority groups, in particular, the ethnic and cultural make-up of the city can contribute to a subjective sense of marginalisation and alienation as different areas come to be divided up and "ghettoised" through mechanisms of social and geographical exclusion (Metcalf, 1996; Sibley, 2003). The way in which migrants and other minorities interact with the spaces around them can tell us much about the social, political, and religious engagements they invest in, as well as the very real way in which they experience their local milieu (Amin and Thrift, 2002; Brenner, 2000; Soja, 1989). In this way, a focus on the urban environment can contribute to a detailed textural understanding of identity, difference, and subject formation in the daily lives of minority groups such as those of (Iraqi) Shi'is living in Britain.

When it comes to the urban environment of London, it is my contention that the increasing diversification of different Shi'a religious establishments has led to a fragmentation of the city-as-lived, in which the vast majority of practising (Iraqi) Shi'is engage with only small isolated pockets of the urban environment on a daily basis.

Moreover, the growing number of specifically Shi'a schools, charities, religious institutions, and community centres has resulted in what I call a "sectarianisation" of space in the northwestern Borough of Brent, in which individuals hailing from different branches of Islam inhabit different spaces within the city despite often living in close proximity to each other. Moreover, this "sectarianisation" of space can be understood as part of the wider shift away from nationalist categories of belonging and towards a trans-ethnic and transnational notion of "Shi'aness". In this sense, the physical carving-up of the city is reflective not merely of micro-level practices and lived experience, but also of globalised political and socio-economic trends in the production of minority identity categories.

Space and Subjectivity: The "Shi'a Triangle"

> Britain's equivalent [of the Shi'a crescent"] is a triangle… Fanning out from a point among the Arab cafes of central London's Edgware Road, the Shi'i centres of population and influence are to be found to the north and west in the boroughs of Brent, Westminster and Harrow. (Bowen, 2014: 135)

Although Shi'a Muslims in London, as in the rest of Britain, remain in the minority in comparison to their Sunni counterparts, there is a particular sliver of northwest London where Shi'a religious institutions not only hold their own, but have even come to dominate the Islamic scene. This concentration of Shi'a religious institutions and activity in the boroughs of Brent, Westminster, and Harrow – especially the neighbourhoods of Brent Park, Cricklewood, Kilburn, Queen's Park, Wembley and Willesden (see Fig. 1). – has resulted in the tongue-in-cheek moniker of "Najaf in Brent" (Bowen, 2014), a reference to the Shi'a religious seminaries of the southern Iraqi city of Najaf. Due to the material and symbolic authority exercised by the *marja'iyya* over ordinary practicing

Shi'is (as explored in Chapter 2), the existence of "Najaf in Brent" is intimately tied to the Shi'a religious establishment in Iraq and Iran through the institutionalisation of religious doctrine and practice.

As well as being institutionally dominant comparative to other Shi'is, Iraqi Shi'is in London have well-established and active religious and civil society institutions through which individuals are able to mobilise, both in terms of orientation towards Iraq itself and in terms of their political and religious views towards entities such as the Iranian or Iraqi regimes, and, more recently, against ISIS. It is this network of Shi'a politico-religious institutions, many of which are explicitly geared towards social and political engagement in Iraq, that has contributed to the sectarianisation of the symbolic and material diasporic space in which different parts of London have come to be associated with different theological and political interpretations of what it means to be "Shi'a" and "Iraqi" in Britain. As previously stated, many (middle-class) Iraqi Shi'is were expelled under Saddam Hussain precisely because of their connection to the religious schools and seminaries of these cities (as well as their alleged – and real – ties to Iran), and have continued to maintain these links in exile. The majority of London-based institutions thus have direct links to the Shi'a *hawzas* in the shrine cities and serve as the official representative of different *maraji'*, conducting outreach and other forms of religious and pastoral care on their behalf.

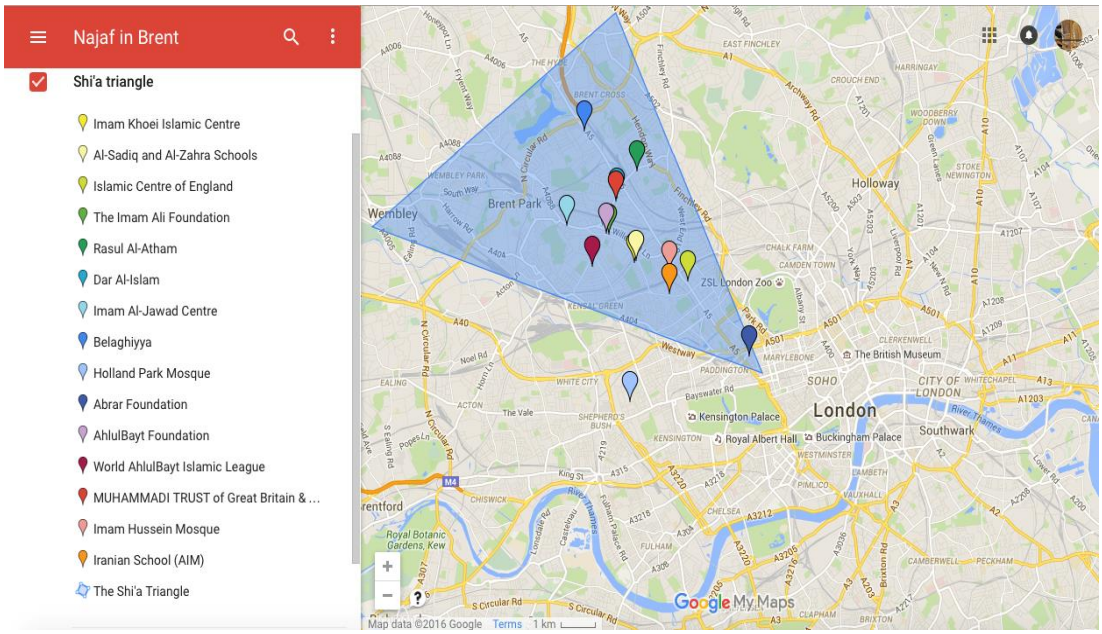

Fig. 3 – Map showing the main religious institutions in the "Shi'a triangle" of northwest London (Source: Author's fieldwork)

As outlined in the previous chapter, because Shi'a jurisprudence requires individuals to follow a particular *marja'* in matters of religious practice and jurisprudence, different institutions in London affiliated to different *maraji'* have thus come to reflect different schools of thought within Shi'a Islam, and especially when it comes to political orientations towards the Islamic Republic of Iran via the following of the late Ayatollah Khomeini (see Table 1).

Name	**Ethno-national background**	**Location**	**Marja' Followed**
Al- Khoei Islamic Centre	Iraqi	Queen's Park	Khoei/Sistani
Al-Sadiq & Al-Zahra schools	Iraqi	Queen's Park	Khoei/Sistani
Islamic Centre of England	Iranian	Maida Vale	Khomeini
Imam Ali Foundation	Iraqi	Willesden	Sistani
Rasul Al-Atham	Iraqi	Cricklewood	Shirazi
Dar Al-Islam	Iraqi	Cricklewood	Sadr (linked to the Islamic Da'wa Party of Iraq)
Imam Al-Jawad Centre	Iraqi	Willesden	Sistani

Belaghiya	Iraqi	Brent Cross	Sistani
Holland Park Mosque	Iranian	Holland Park	Khomeini/ Khamanei
AhlulBayt Foundation	Iraqi	Willesden	Sistani
World AhlulBayt Islamic League	Indo-Pakistani	Kensal Green	Sistani
Muhammadi Trust	Indo-Pakistani	Willesden	Sistani
Imam Hussain Mosque	Lebanese	Kilburn	Fadhlallah/Sistani

Table 1. – Major Shi'a Institutions in London by background and affiliation
(Source: Author's fieldwork)

In practice, this means that the personal and political rivalries between different schools of Shi'a thought have been written into the urban fabric of London through the institutionalisation of the *marja'iyya* in the city. As one of my research participants, a British-born Iraqi Shi'i, explained, mapping out the various spheres of different Shi'a theological and political influence in London:

> **A:** [Al-Khoei Foundation, Ahlulbayt Foundation, Salaam Foundation, Imam Ali Foundation and al-Hakim Foundation]; this is one big happy family. This is Najaf in Brent. Then you have the [Islamic Centre of England].… this is what I call "Iran", when we say Iran we mean the government. [Then] over here we have another sect, we'll call these *Shiraziyya*, Shirazis. And they have Rasul Al-'Atham, which is the biggest *hussainiya* in London.
>
> **EDE:** Where's that?
>
> **A:** Cricklewood.
>
> **EDE:** And who are they?
>
> **A:** They're the Shirazis [i.e. followers of Ayatollah Shirazi]… They basically call themselves the *Karbala'is*. They're the… if I put it to you, these are the extreme right, in terms of their theology.
>
> **EDE:** So extremely orthodox?

A: Yeah. They're the ones with the *tatbir*[100] and everything. Full on… And if we say these guys [points to Dar Al-Islam], are Da'wa[101] and that, they're the lefties.

EDE: Ok. And who are Najaf? They're not political?

A: They're not political, but they're in the middle. We say that they're, what we call it, the right path… Whoever's backed by Najaf is in charge of everything. (Interview 6)

This polarisation of political and theological opinion within the Shi'a religious establishment means that in London, the choice of which Shi'a religious institution to frequent is often indicative of the politics of the individuals concerned, and is thus physically mapped onto the fabric of the city. For example, the Iraqi-run Dar Al-Islam is both a religious institution and the headquarters of the Islamic Da'wa Party in London; for this reason, Shi'is who frequent this establishment tend to have political leanings sympathetic to the current Iraqi government. At the other end of the political spectrum, the Iranian-run Islamic Centre of England (ICE) has close ties to the Islamic Republic and although tends to maintain good relations with Najaf harbours a number of fundamental theological disagreements especially with regards to the Iranian state doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih*.

Arguably the largest and most influential Shi'a religious and cultural establishment in London (as well as the oldest Iraqi-run Shi'a institution in the UK) is the Imam Al-Khoei Benevolent Foundation (known as the Al-Khoei Foundation). Founded in 1989 by Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei, to represent the *marja'iyya* globally, the Foundation was the first of a number of transnational charitable and philanthropic institutions established through

[100] Controversial ritual cutting of the forehead practiced by certain strands of Shi'a Muslims and banned by the religious establishment in Najaf (though not officially banned in Iran, the practice is denounced by Ayatollah Khamenei).
[101] Dar Al-Islam serves as the institutional representation of Iraq's Islamic Da'wa Party in the UK.

the patronage of the al-Khoei family (other foundations were later set up in Bangladesh, India, Iran, Pakistan, Thailand, and the US). Indeed, it is difficult to understate the significance of the Al-Khoei Foundation as an unparalleled force for extending the transnational influence of the al-Khoei family across the world:

> The establishment of a foundation to manage the affairs of a source of emulation had no precedent in the history of Shi'ism. The decision to headquarter it away from the centres of learning where the clerical establishment is traditionally based, let alone in the West, was equally innovative… In so doing, the foundation… offered a hybridised version of clerical leadership by combining a modern NGO-type structure and the *marja'iyya*'s traditional networking practices. (Corboz, 2015: 57)

Thus not only did the al-Khoei family institutionally cement itself as a source of religious authority and philanthropic support, the choice to headquarter the Foundation in London was indicative of both the increasingly transnational nature of Shi'ism and of the role of London as a political and religious centre for exiled Iraqi Shi'is in the diaspora. Following Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei's death in 1992, the role of supreme *marja'* was transferred to his student, Ali al-Hussain al-Sistani, along with the religious leadership of the Al-Khoei Foundation (though the administrative and practical leadership of the foundation remains in the hands of the al-Khoei family). As well as serving as a representative of Sistani, the Foundation hosts a mosque, a library, a community centre, and the Al-Sadiq (boys) an Al-Zahra (girls) private schools[102] – the only Shi'a schools in the UK. As part of its educational remit, in 2009, the Foundation established the Centre for Academic Shi'a Studies (CASS) under the directorate of Yousif al-Khoei (the grandson

[102] More on Shi'a educational establishments later in the chapter.

of Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei and nephew of Abdul Majid) with the stated aim of "promoting original, contemporary, and impartial scholarship on Shi'a Islam and Muslims."[103]

Part of the Foundation's power and influence comes from the period of Abdul Majid al-Khoei's directorship (prior to his assassination in Iraq 2003), during which it established prominent links to the British government under Tony Blair and proved influential in shaping British and US policy agendas towards the regime of Saddam Hussain in Iraq. However, while its ties to the UK government continue to make the Al-Khoei Foundation "the main bridge between the Shi'a in Britain and wider society" (Bowen, 2014: 141), the institution's willingness to work with the Home Office on issues such as counter-terrorism and extremism, often in an advisory capacity to senior government figures, has made many ordinary practicing Shi'is suspicious of its motives and power. Nevertheless, CASS and the Al-Khoei Foundation continue to be among the most influential Shi'a institutions in diasporic London today, and play a significant role in the shaping of the diasporic (Iraqi-)Shi'a subject. As the centre's current legal representative affirmed to me: "In terms of Shi'a organisations, I don't think anyone can compete with us."[104]

Being Iraqi(-Shi'a) in London

The various political and religious divisions within the Shi'a establishment are thus reflected in the multiple and competing institutions vying for the patronage of Shi'is in London. Nevertheless, one of my predominant observations gleaned from frequenting such institutions is that for practicing Iraqi Shi'is in London, the choice of which *hussainiyya* to attend on a particular day is often shaped as much by social and familial ties than by religious doctrine or ideology. During the Islamic month of Muharram, for example, I noticed that individuals would often attend different institutions on different

[103] CASS website, accessed 26 June 2016
[104] Author's fieldnotes, 10 September 2015.

days, or even attend several in the same night, often dictated by the preferences of family and friends.[105] One of my research participants, Um Zainab, a middle-aged Iraqi woman with a close-knit female friendship group, even spent several hours a day during Muharram calling up each of her friends to find out where they were going that evening and to arrange transport and lift sharing. For Abu Dalia, on the other hand, a young Iraqi-born man who moved to the UK as a child, the most important factor in deciding which *hussainiyya* to attend is the quality and type of the food handed out at the end of each religious service (as he told me: "Karbala'iyya make the best *qeema*").[106]

Despite internal communal divisions, then, the concentration of Iraqi Shi'a religious centres and institutions in one corner of northwest London has arguably shaped the lived experience of practicing Iraqi Shi'is in the diaspora such that individuals often speak about feeling part of an "(Iraqi-)Shi'a community" that is defined through its relation to the material and social fabric of the city of London. More than this, the very geography of London itself has come to define the boundaries of particular religious and social groupings, concentrated around the different Shi'a religious and political establishments. For example, a recurring trope encountered during the research process was of the difference between Iraqi Shi'is living and frequenting different areas of London, especially the neighbourhoods of Kingston, Ealing, and Wembley. As one of my research participants explained:

> The [Iraqi] Shi'a community breaks down into different ethnicities and different schools of thought; it's group thinking. For example, you have what's known as the Wembley Iraqis, the Ealing Iraqis, and the Kingston Iraqis. The Wembley

[105] For the younger generation, the choice of which *hussainiyya* to attend is often dictated by the particular orator speaking on a given night, with some English-language speakers attracting large and devout followings.
[106] Informal conversation with Abu D, 15 November 2015. Source: Author's fieldnotes.

> Iraqis tend to be traditional, religious and working class; the Ealing Iraqis tend to be liberal and higher class, but still religious; and the Kingston Iraqis tend to be liberal and secular, they often see themselves as British. Me, for example, I'm from Wembley, because I grew up there, but I'm "Ealing": I'm not traditional-style religious, I focus more on principles. (Interview 19)

In this way, the proliferation of Shi'a religious, political, and civil society institutions in different parts of London (especially Wembley, which is in the borough of Brent) is seen as shaping the levels of religious conservatism and political orientation of Iraqi Shi'is living in this area. This, in turn, serves to contribute to the consolidation of a specifically *Shi'a* politico-religious identity, one in which Iraqi national belonging becomes tempered with and superseded by ethno-sectarian articulations and inscribed onto the physical fabric of the city (Degli Esposti, forthcoming 2018). Such articulations can be seen as part of the discursive construction of Shi'a spaces within London by practicing Iraqi Shi'is, and serves to illustrate how religious-inflected spatialities come to shape individual and collective understandings of identity, and vice versa.

As well as shaping the lived reality of Iraqi Shi'is in London through the institutionalisation of Shi'a religiosity into the fabric of the city itself, Shi'a religious and civil society establishments in the UK also offer a place for the fostering of communal ties and social belonging. For example, many of the young British-born Iraqis Shi'is I interviewed described how as children growing up in London in the 1990s their parents would regularly take them to the *hussainiyya* as a way to meet other Iraqis exiled in the UK and to exchange gossip and news. One interviewee, a secular Iraqi from a Shi'a background who fled the country as a young man in 1980 out of fear of being targeted by Saddam Hussain's regime, spoke about how he would often visit *hussainiyyat* in London during the 1991 Gulf War as a way to keep up to date with developments in Iraq:

> I don't consider myself a religious man but I started to go to the mosque, or to the *hussainiyya* in '91 just to get the fresh news from Baghdad. Because there by faxes the news was coming by minutes [sic]. (Interview 4)

In this sense, the *hussainiyyat* and other Shi'a institutions acted as social and community "glue" that kept exiled Iraqi Shi'is together and allowed them to stay in touch both with each other and with developments "back home" in Iraq. In the London context, the *hussainiyyat* engendered a sense of community by acting as a physical meeting place for diasporic Iraqi Shi'is; one that was simultaneously inscribed with religious meaning through the observance of rites and practices and that was oriented towards religious and political engagement with domestic developments in Iraq. This is analogous to the experience of many migrant religions, in which religious institutions come to take on renewed social (and often even political) significance in the host state (Levitt, 2001, 2004; Menjivar, 1999; Metcalf, 1996; Schiffauer, 1988; among others).

Thus, only in exile did the notion of "Shi'ism" as an institutionally-defined religious and political community come to play a dominant role in the self-perception of Iraqi Shi'is who had, while in Iraq, identified themselves through varying political, social, and demographic affiliations (Flynn, 2013). For example, many Shi'is prior to leaving Iraq saw themselves as primarily Najafis or Kerbala'is[107] (inhabitants of the southern Iraqi cities of Najaf and Karbala), Communists or Da'wa Party members, secularists or nationalists – rather than as Shi'is in and of themselves. Indeed, many scholars have stressed the significance of regional, ethnic, socio-economic, political, and tribal

[107] Indeed, these regional rivalries have even seeped into the diasporic experience through the way in which different Shi'a religious establishments are seen as being "Najafi" or "Karbala'i" – one *hussainiya* in particular, Rasul al-'Atham, is even known informally as "*al-Karbala'iyya*" ("the Karbala'i one").

identities in Iraq prior to the US-led invasion of 2003, and the relative lack of salience afforded to identities based on religious sect (Batatu, 2012; Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, 2001; Nakash, 2003; Tripp, 2002; Zubaida, 2002).

In the London context, then, it wasn't so much the commonality of Shi'a religious conviction (many Iraqi migrants had vastly divergent views of religion) than the experience of meeting and socialising within a religiously-defined space that led to the construction of a sense of communal religious and political identity articulated around the notion of "Shi'aness". Moreover, this notion of an "Iraqi" community in London came to be intimately tied to a sense of common Shi'a identity – whether religious, political, or social – as a result of the way in which Iraqi-run *hussainiyyat* doubled as spaces of communal belonging and religious practices. As one young man told me, British-born Iraqi Shi'is tend to "see their Iraqiness *as* Shi'aness; they show how Iraqi they are by being more and more Shi'a" (Interview 22), while another affirmed that "traditionally, Shi'a Islam was about being a good Muslim and getting on with people; whereas now it's about being *seen* as being Shi'a, as marking yourself out to be different" (Interview 5).

Fragmented Realities: Ethno-Sectarianism in the City

In this sense, the institutionalisation of Shi'ism in the urban fabric of London, and the material and discursive links between Shi'a spaces in the city and those in Iraq and Iran, have contributed to the crystallisation of an ethno-sectarian sense of communal and religious identity in which Shi'a religiosity has come to supersede Iraqi national belonging to be replaced with a more pan-ethnic sense of "Shi'aness". Moreover, the physical inscription of Shi'a religiosity onto London's urban landscape has also resulted in bracketing off areas of the city as Shi'a-dominant "ghettos" where Muslims from different theological schools rarely attend the same religious or community institution, even if they live in close proximity to each other. One example of this is the proximity of

Regent's Park Mosque and the Islamic Centre of England – each of these establishments is formally a religious centre, and thus in theory open to Muslims (and non-Muslims) of all denominations; and yet in practice the former is frequented almost exclusively by Sunnis and the latter by Shi'is. As one of my interviewees explained, describing his experience of living in Marylebone:

> **AM:** I hate this area that I live in because we have this stupid Regent's Park Mosque here…
>
> **EDE:** What's wrong with Regent's Park Mosque?
>
> **A:** They're very undercover, but they support terrorism.
>
> **EDE:** What do you mean?
>
> **A:** Like, for example, they invited [X].[108] He is like the biggest person who, who hates Shi'is and called for everyone to cut Shi'is heads off. They invited him to give lectures there.
>
> **EDE:** Really?
>
> **A:** Yeah. And we've even done, in our lobby group, we've done experiments. One of our friends, he went to pray in a Sunni mosque and they told him to leave.
>
> **EDE:** So you never pray in Sunni mosques? Even though Regent's Park Mosque is right here you never go?
>
> **A:** No – It's very sad. The other day somebody went to Regent's Park Mosque, he put down a *torba*,[109] he wanted to pray, and they kicked it out of in front of him.
>
> (Interview 6)

Although it is difficult to verify the truth of this information, what is clear is that this young man does not identify with the type of Islam promoted at Regent's Park Mosque

[108] Name deleted to preserve anonymity.
[109] Small clay tablet used by Shi'a Muslims during prayer.

and therefore never goes to pray there, even though it is the closest religious centre to him; preferring instead to travel further north to frequent the Imam Jawad Foundation and Al-Khoei Centre (N.B. this is the same man who referred to Salafis as "beardy-weirdys"[110] and expressed feeling uncomfortable walking down Edgware Road). In this sense, we can see how the politics of sectarianism finds physical manifestation in the urban environment of London through the creation of alternately Shi'a- and Sunni-dominated areas and the shift away from inclusive Islamic religious centres in the city and towards those defined by affiliation to a particular strand of Islam (and even to different schools within those strands).

In the case of (Iraqi) Shi'is in London, the reification of Shi'a "groupness" (Brubaker, 2002) through the proliferation of Shi'a religious and civil society organisations has thus contributed to the crystallisation of what it means to be "Shi'a" in the context of Islamic London in a way that often explicitly constructs different Islamic sects in a logic of mutual exclusion. In particular, the consolidation of the "Shi'a triangle" in northwest London[111] has led to a concentration of Shi'a Muslims in certain neighbourhoods and to the perceived polarisation of the city between "Sunni" East London and "Shi'a" (North)West London. In practice, this has come to mean that even though Sunnis and Shi'is in London may both inhabit the same physical space – such as living on and around Edgware Road – individuals belonging to differently practicing Islamic denominations no longer move among those spaces in the same way; preferring instead to frequent religious institutions geared specifically to their specific (sectarian) needs. It is for this reason that individuals such as AM come to feel "uncomfortable" when walking down the street in certain parts

[110] See p. 160.

[111] Despite colloquial claims to the "Shi'a Triangle" and "Najaf in Brent", it is difficult to verify the extent to which Shi'a Muslims do indeed dominate the institutional and demographic landscape of northwest London since there is little reliable data on the number of institutions of other religious denominations in this area. However, for the purposes of this thesis, it is important to note that the *perceived* dominance of Shi'a Muslims in Brent forms part of the discursive construction of space in the city, and is therefore tied to the kinds of social, political, and religious identities cultivated within such spaces.

of the city; the discord between their psychic and discursive understanding of their place in the urban fabric and the physical reality of the built environment can lead to a sense of unease and a desire to surround themselves with the "familiarity" of those who think and act like themselves. This all-too-human need for the familiar becomes politicised when the dividing lines between sameness and difference, "us" and "them", become defined by ethno-religious categories such as Islamic sect. This is not to say that Sunnis and Shi'is do not mix at all – far from it – but rather that when community spaces become politically-charged, the result is a sectarianisation of religious and institutional space.

What are the implications of this sectarianisation of the city-as-lived when it comes to the formation of the diasporic Shi'a subject? Moreover, what is the significance of the UK context in defining and policing what it means to be "Shi'a" today? I have already explored the ways in which the meaning and content of the identity categories "Iraqi" and "Shi'a" have changed across time and space (in chapters 1 and 2, respectively); here, I wish to turn to the emergence of a trans-ethnic and transnational conception of "Shi'aness" invested in the British domestic context – in other words, to the advent of "British Shi'ism" within the diasporic imaginary.

Be(com)ing British Shi'a: The Shaping of the Diasporic Imaginary

The distillation of the sectarianised (Iraqi-)Shi'a diasporic subject, a category of belonging predicated on an ethnonormative conception of "Shi'aness" discursively bound by the institution and material fabric of the city of London and defined in opposition to the UK government's pejorative and securitised construction of (Sunni) Islam, thus owes much to the significance of the British social and political context productive of the (Shi'a) diasporic imaginary. For the growing number of British-born Shi'is, this is the context that permeates their everyday lives; and thus holds greater resonance for them than the social and political contexts of their parents' and grandparents' countries of origin. Just as there is an increasing prevalence of British-

born Sunni Muslim identifying as part of a wider "British (Sunni) Islam" (Cesari, 2004; Grewal, 2013; Hopkins and Gale, 2009; Mandaville, 2001; Meer, 2008, 2010; Meer and Modood, 2009; Metcalf, 1996; Modood et al., 1997, 2006, Modood, 2003, 2006; Modood and Werbner, 1997; Roy, 2004; among others), so too is the shift from nationalistic to religious-sectarian identity categories amongst diasporic (Iraqi) Shi'is in the UK being increasingly manifested as an orientation towards "British Shi'ism".

To reiterate, this is not to claim that all practicing Shi'a Muslims in the UK (Iraqi or otherwise) tend to prioritise their religious and sectarian identities over their ethno-national origins or political convictions (identity, after all, resides on a spectrum). Indeed, many Shi'is across all generations actively seek engagement with the domestic contexts of their countries of origin (the Iraqi Youth Group, Iraqi Youth Foundation, and Iraqi Youth Network being but three examples of diasporic youth involvement in Iraqi politics). Rather, it is my contention that the orientation towards a trans-ethnic and transnational conception of "British Shi'ism" is a relatively new and growing phenomenon, and is borne out of the diasporic context of Britain itself.

The identity-category "Shi'a" has, in the British domestic context, thus come to transcend its doctrinal origins and instead been invested with a form of universal political significance that is performatively (re)iterated through the public and private enactment of religious rituals and political narratives. For the younger generation, their Iraqi (or Pakistani, or Lebanese, or Bahraini, or Afghan, or Khoja, etc.) "origins" are becoming less significant than their orientation towards specifically *Shi'a* modes of performance and belonging. As one young man, reflecting on his childhood growing up in Britain in the late 1980s/early 1990s, remarked: "Iraqi identity was never particularly prominent for us… our identity was primarily Muslim Shi'a" (Interview 10). In particular, the rise of English-language Shi'a religious and community institutions and programmes have

contributed to the crystallisation of a sense of "British Shi'ism" amongst British-born practicing Shi'is in the UK (and in London in particular).

Language and Learning

The tendency for subsequent generations of migrants to adopt the language of their host country has been well documented in the academic literature (Al-Ali and Koser, 2003; Cummins, 1981; Dustmann, 1994; Dustmann and Fabbri, 2003; Hree et al., 2013; Selmer and Lauring, 2015); indeed, English is fast becoming the primary language for a growing number of British-born Shi'is (Iraqi or otherwise) (Flaskerud, 2014; Scharbrodt et al., 2017; Scharbrodt and Shanneik, 2018; Spellman-Poots, 2012). In the diasporic setting, language functions as the great equaliser; only by speaking English can practicing Shi'is from diverse ethno-national backgrounds come together and communicate effectively – thus contributing towards a communal sense of what it means to be "Shi'a" within the British context. But the significance of English goes beyond its status as the primary language of cross-cultural communication for diasporic Shi'is. As Shin and Kubota (2008: 206) argue: "language.. is embedded in sociopolitical and economic relations of power" and plays a key role in "the construction as well as transformation of… cultural and linguistic images of the Self and the Other." In this sense, the growing prevalence of English within Shi'a religious and cultural institutions in the UK points towards a specific iteration of the Shi'a subject that is deeply embedded in the linguistic and discursive context of the diasporic experience.

The increasing prevalence of English is thus significant not merely for the construction of a sense of "Shi'aness" rooted in the British domestic context, it also actively works to break down linguistic and cultural barriers between practicing Shi'is from different ethno-national backgrounds and allows them to engage with each other within the diasporic setting. Moreover, the rise of English-language Shi'a religious and cultural

institutions in the UK has also facilitated Shi'a political mobilisation in the diaspora by firstly allowing such institutions to make claims and demands from British domestic and state institutions (the Al-Khoei Foundation being the most prominent example), and secondly by connecting UK-based institutions with similar Shi'a establishments around the world. In this sense, the advent of English-language Shi'a religious and political practice in the diaspora has worked to promote a globalised and transnational conception of "Shi'a identity" that is no longer linguistically or geographically bound. The rise of English has thus supplemented the existing transnational focus of Shi'ism as epitomised by the *marja'iyya* and turned it into a global (and globalised) phenomenon.

English is not only the language of choice for the majority of British-born Shi'is when it comes to everyday communication; it is also increasingly becoming the primary language of religious education and instruction in a variety of different settings and contexts. For example, the Al-Khoei Foundation-affiliated Al-Sadiq and Al-Zahra schools, the only Shi'a schools in the UK, offer an English-language curriculum to fee-paying students from ages 3-16 (pre-school to Year 2 is mixed, and Years 3 - 11 is single sex). Founded in 1991, the school(s) mostly adheres to the UK national syllabus, with extra courses in Arabic, Qur'an, and Islamic Studies taking around 10 percent of the timetable (Ofsted, 2014). According to the school's website, it purports to offer "an education based upon academic excellence coupled with principles of morality, tolerance and spiritual understanding" to prepare pupils to live "in a fast changing secular environment which often manifests itself in a declining trend in moral and social behaviour."[112] In the school's last Ofsted inspection in 2014, the report concluded that:

> The school curriculum ensures that pupils make progress in all the required areas of learning. It is broad and balanced, and takes account of an appropriate range of

[112] http://www.al-khoei.org/about-2/the-foundation, accessed 2 July 2017

> subjects in addition to its stated Islamic aims. It prepares pupils well for life in modern Britain and caters effectively for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. (Ofsted, 2014)

Along with the Al-Sadiq and Al-Zahra schools, London is also home to a number of Shi'a higher education institutions, most notably the International Colleges of Islamic Science (ICIS), founded in 1989 by Dr Sayyid Fadhil al-Milani, and the Islamic College of Advanced Studies (ICAS), founded in 1998. While ICIS mostly functions as a religious seminary, offering Arabic-language courses on Islamic law and jurisprudence, ICAS (which receives most of its funding from Iran; Bowen, 2014) provides undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications accredited by the University of Middlesex. Nevertheless, for many ordinary practicing Shi'is the most significant exposure they receive to Shi'a teaching and religious practice occurs not from such institutions but during the 'Ashura *majalis* of the Islamic month of Muharram.

Since the first English-language *majlis* was held at the Imam Jawad Centre in the early 2000s, there has been a veritable explosion of new organisations and privately-run *majalis* specifically geared towards a younger, English-speaking audience. A poster circulated of the main UK-based public *majalis* for Muharram 2015, for example, listed 28 English-language events out of a total of 49 (roughly 50 percent). Of these, 19 included lectures and/or *latmiyyat* in both English and another language (mostly Arabic, Urdu, or Farsi), whilst the remaining seven were conducted entirely in English. The self-proclaimed pioneer of the trend towards English-language *majalis*, exiled Iraqi scholar Sayyid Fadhil Bahrululoom, explained the significance of English during an interview conducted by Ahlulbayt TV in December 2013:

> I asked the *shabab* [young people] when they came to see me why we need a *majlis* in English, and they said "Because we don't understand most of the *khataba* [speakers]." The *majalis*, most of them were packed, the Arabic *majalis*, and they grew every year, but the *shabab*, the children, always used to play outside, sometimes making troubles to neighbours, because the child he get bored [sic]. All of them, they never understood what was going on… And when we started [the English *majalis*], all of those [children] who were outside the *majalis*, they attend the *majlis*. Because unfortunately, our parents' generation whose first language is Arabic, they don't realise that their children's first language is not Arabic, or Urdu, or Farsi, it's English. So we should deliver the message [of Imam Hussain] in English.[113]

Here, the instigation of English-language *majalis* is seen as key to ensuring the continued transmission of the "message of Imam Hussain" across the generations. Significantly, the provision of English-language religious events is also seen as an extension Shi'a religious piety in which the "serving of Imam Hussain" is seen as a (politico-)religious duty aimed at making specific claims regarding the place of Shi'ism in the world (Bahrululoom, 2013). As Sayyid Fadhil commented during an interview with myself in summer 2014, "unlike the Kurds and the Jews", Shi'is "haven't made use" of the atrocities committed against them; "Even now, everyone's talking about the Christians and Yazidis, but not the Shi'a who have fled Mosul and who are being persecuted and slaughtered by Da'esh [ISIS]" (Interview 7). The implication being that the growing prevalence of English will allow Shi'is to make their voices heard (recall NM commenting that "the Shi'a are all silent") in a way that is globally accessible.

[113] Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KkGGDWrj5MY, accessed 27 October 2015.

The rise of English-language academic and religious education amongst diasporic Shi'is in Britain, therefore, isn't only significant for the way in which it promotes a trans-ethnic and transnational Shi'a subject that is increasingly divorced from its Arabic (and Arab) ethno-linguistic roots and invested in a globalised sense of "Shi'aness", English is also becoming the language of choice for second- and third-generation Shi'is who wish to make their voices heard and promote their specific vision of Shi'a spirituality and ethics. Indeed, as the poster for the fourth annual Imam Hussain English Poetry Competition articulated, each poem should be "aimed at non-Muslim readers" and attempt to "link the message of Imam Hussain to struggles facing humanity in modern times" (Author's fieldnotes). The discursive power of English, in other words, plays a key role in the construction and dissemination of a globalised ethical Shi'a subject invested in a positive affirmation of "Shi'a identity".

"We've kind of created our own culture"

The advent of a "British Shi'a" identity is thus very much a product of the diasporic experience; both in terms of the dilution of ethno-national origins through the experience of exile and diaspora and in terms of the significance of the British domestic context in fostering a sense of what it means to be both "British" *and* "Shi'a" in the contemporary world. As one young man noted, reflecting on his British identity, asserted that: "This is my country; I'll fight for my country and I'll die for my country… Honestly, I would fight for Great Britain" (Interview 6). While another young woman emphasised her sense of being both British *and* Shi'a: "I think that more people associate themselves as being British Shi'a than being British-Iraqi-Shi'a. We've kind of created our own culture. Generally for most people your religion takes a higher status because it's a way of life" (Interview 28).

A significant part of this burgeoning "British Shi'a culture" is the proliferation of youth-led organisations and events, whether that be those geared towards religion and piety (such as the Imam Hussain Conference, the Imam Hussain Legacy Exhibition, the Imam Hussain Slam Poetry Competition, the Islamic Unity Society, or the Ahlulbayt Islamic Mission), charity and activism (such as the Al-Ayn Foundation, the Iraqi Children's Aid and Repair Endeavour, the Imam Hussain Blood Donation Campaign, and the "Who Is Hussain?" campaign), or media and education (including Alhlulbayt TV, Safeer TV, the Young Hussainy magazine, or the Centre for Academic Shi'a Studies). The accumulation of Shi'a-specific religious and cultural institutions, events, and community networks (increasingly run in English by the younger generation of British-born Shi'is) this contributed to the distillation of a "Shi'a identity" within the British context. As one young Iranian Shi'a woman remarked in a blog post on "Shi'aphobia": [114]

> When I'm in my Shi'a mosque, I can express my love for the Ahlul-Bayt without that love being perceived as excessive, un-Islamic, or self-seeking. I'm not met with suspicion if I'm *really* a Muslim and I don't have to account for a different interpretation of Islamic history or exegesis of the Qur'an. (Shereen Yousuf, 16 July 2015)[115]

Here, the writer's sense of what it means to "be Shi'a" is being defined in opposition to those Muslims who would seek to classify Shi'is as "excessive, un-Islamic, or self-seeking" (a reference to a particular strand of radical Sunni Islam), and consolidated through the creation of Shi'a-only religious spaces. This sense of a Shi'a-specific identity defined in opposition to (particular interpretations of) Sunni Islam is partly, as explored above, a

[114] The concept of "Shi'aphobia" is explored in detail in Chapter 4 and as such not addressed directly here,

[115] http://www.patheos.com/blogs/hindtrospectives/2015/07/shiaphobia-at-the-intersection-and-why-it-matters/, accessed 2 July 2017.

result of the social and political context of Britain; but it also contributes to *positive* articulations of "Shi'a identity" by giving substance and content to the category of "Shi'aness". While attachments to places, languages, and cultures of migrant origin fade with each subsequent generation born in exile, there is an important sense in which attachments to religious identities become distilled within the diasporic imaginary – this is an effect that has been well-documented in the literature on migrant religions (Alfonso et al., 2004; Axel, 2002; Ebaugh, 2003; Levitt, 2003; Mandaville, 2001; Menjivar, 1999a; Vertovec, 2004). In this sense, the production of the sectarianised Shi'a subject can be seen as a direct result of the various discursive, material, social, and political power structures circulating and operating within the diasporic imaginary. One young British-born Iraqi Shi'a woman I met during a pilgrimage trip to Iran, for example, remarked that she "didn't mind" whether her future husband was "Iraqi, Pakistani, Iranian" or any other nationality, but affirmed could "never marry" a Sunni because she considered herself to be "just *too* Shi'a":

> Even if you get a sympathetic Sunni, there are some things they just don't understand – like Muharram. Also, if [I married a Sunni and] we had kids and they do some things the Shi'a way and some things the Sunni way that would just be confusing for them. I feel like growing up Muslim in the West we already have enough to be confused about… Shi'ism is the only thing we have left to hold on to; we've already lost our culture. (Interview 27)

Interestingly, this same young woman (who is an '*alwiyya* – female descendent of the Prophet) later went on to marry a third-generation Pakistani Shi'a man who she met during the same pilgrimage trip[116] – a match that would have been unheard of amongst

[116] Anecdotally, I collected testimonies to the effect that such trips are often used for match-making purposes by pious young Shi'is who otherwise might fins it difficult to mingle with the opposite sex.

first-generation diasporans. For this young woman, the religious identity of her future husband (Shi'a Muslim) was more important to her than his potential ethnic or national origins – indeed, throughout my fieldwork I encountered examples of British-born Shi'is socialising with Shi'is from different backgrounds, but all of whom were drawn together as a result of their shared sense of "Shi'aness".

For many young British-born Shi'is, it is thus increasingly impossible to separate their faith from their everyday life as British citizens of a multicultural city, where they are required to both articulate their difference in order to be recognised as a minority group and to adjust the demands of their religion to accommodate the reality of the environment in which they find themselves. During a pilgrimage trip to Iran for second-generation British Shi'is in June 2015, for example, I observed a conversation between R, a British-born Pakistani, and Z, a British-born Iraqi, discussing Ayatollah Sistani's fatwa telling people to boycott Starbucks coffee chains:

> **R:** I'm sorry, but Sistani needs to try living in the West. He's a great *'alim* [scholar], but some things you need to experience in order to understand.
>
> **Z:** I agree. And in any case, I don't think one person boycotting Starbucks is going to change the world. I'd rather have my caramel macchiato!
>
> (Author's fieldnotes, 19 June 2015)

Here, the two women are negotiating their Shi'a identity in relation both to the transnational influence of the clerical establishment and to their own personal experiences of being born and brought up "in the West"; and carving out a path between the two that combines their commitment to Shi'ism as a religion and their attachment to being British and Western. As F, the woman who went on to marry a Pakistani Shi'i, told me during the same trip: "As much as I love coming to these places and doing *ziyara*

[pilgrimage], I don't think I could ever live here. It's just too different [from the UK]" (Interview 27).

Such examples point to the emergence of a particular way to be and do "Shi'aness" within the British domestic context that increasingly incorporate the experience of exile and diaspora, the lived reality of multicultural Britain, the transnational influence of the Shi'a clerical establishment, and the political contours of sectarian conflicts in the Middle East. The sectarianised Shi'a diasporic subject thus reveals itself as a discursive construction resulting from a diverse web of interconnected power relations – whether that be the enduring trauma of exile, the transnational legacy of the *marja'iyya*, or the symbolic resonance of ISIS as the epitome of evil against which the Shi'a subject seeks to define itself. Moreover, the various articulations and manifestations of this subject are deeply embedded in the British domestic context, and are reflective of the various discourses of multiculturalism, ethnonormativity, Islamophobia, minority rights, and Shi'a spatialities within the UK and London specifically. It it the ensemble of these discourses that thus make up the diasporic imaginary productive of the sectarianised Shi'a subject under interrogation here.

Conclusion

This chapter has supplemented the argument made in the previous two chapters regarding the shift from nationalist to religious (and sectarian) forms of identification and belonging by tracing the emergence of a trans-ethnic and transnational Shi'a subject within the diasporic context. Significantly, it is my contention that the particularities of the British social and political context, coupled with the experience of exile and diaspora and the transnational influence of the Shi'a clerical establishment, have contributed to the decoupling of Shi'a ethno-religious identity from any meaningful sense of Iraqi national origins, especially for second- and third-generation diasporans born in the UK

who consider themselves to be "British". The gradual shift from the *Iraqi*-Shi'a subject, to the (Iraqi-)*Shi'a* subject, to the diasporic *Shi'a subject*, tout court, thus reflects a complex combination of historical, political, and social factors that contribute to individuals' sense of subjective and collective belonging. While the significance of Iraq (or rather, "Iraq"[117]) continues to have resonance within the diasporic imaginary, in articulations of "British Shi'ism" it has become nothing more than a hollowed-out signifier representative of specific types of orientations and attachments towards a sectarianised Shi'a subject.

For this reason, the remainder of the thesis will focus less on the specific experiences of diasporic Iraqi Shi'is in the UK and more on the ways in which the diasporic Shi'a subject (imagined as a trans-ethnic and transnational identification with Shi'a ethno-religious belonging) has been differentially articulated within the diasporic imaginary. Part of this will involve exploring how the encounter with Western discourses of liberalism, justice, and minority rights (explored in Chapter 4), as well as the hegemonic influence of global (neo-)capitalism (Chapter 5), have been constitutive of the sectarianised Shi'a subject within the diasporic context. In this sense, chapters 4 and 5 represent a discursive and empirical shift from the previous three chapters, in which the primary focus is on the contours and articulations of the Shi'a subject itself, divorced from the ethno-national background of the individuals who identify with it. This move away from nationalistic and towards sectarian and religious forms of identification should thus be seen as part of a wider global movement towards the particularisation and compartmentalisation of identity categories.

Chapter 4 – "Shi'a Rights": Towards an Ethical Shi'a Subject

[117] "Iraq" denoting a symbolic signifier, as outlined in Chapter 1.

Introduction

The first three chapters of this thesis have traced the emergence of the sectarianised Shi'a subject among Iraqi Shi'i diasporans in the UK as a discursive product of multiple factors; including the experience of exile and migration, the politicisation of Shi'a religious mythology, the influence of the Shi'a clerical establishment, and the discursive, material, and institutional fabric of diasporic London. Rather than continuing to excavate the origins of the sectarianised Shi'a subject, the final two chapters concern themselves primarily with the way in which this subject is currently being articulated, performed, and conceptualised within the contemporary diasporic imaginary. In particular, it is my contention that the development of a transnational and trans-ethnic conception of "Shi'aness" as a bounded identity category is a product of the encounter both with liberal normative discourses, such as those of "equality", "justice", and "human rights", and of the commodification of identities on the global marketplace. In this sense, the sectarianisation of the diasporic Shi'a subject can be understood not as arising from some kind of primordial or ahistorical sectarian "essence", but rather as thoroughly modern phenomenon reflective of contemporary political, social, and discursive trends.

This chapter seeks to explore the first half of this equation, documenting how the diasporic encounter with ("Western") liberal norms has led to the emergence of what I term the discourse of "Shi'a Rights".[118] While Shi'is have been persecuted and marginalised as a minority religious group throughout history (Barzegar, 2008a, 2008b; Dabashi, 2011; Louër and King, 2012; Machlis, 2014; Nasr, 2006; Ridgeon, 2012; Walker, 2006), the emergence of a specifically *Shi'a* ethno-religious minority identity, I would

[118] The term "Shi'a Rights" (with a capital "R") thus refers to a specific set of discursive and normative claims pertaining to Shi'a Muslims founded on the logic of ethical humanitarianism, and is conceptually and analytically distinct from the term "Shi'a rights", which denotes the political, social, and civic rights of Shi'a Muslims as differentially experienced across different historical and geographical contexts.

like to suggest, is a relatively new phenomenon. Indeed, this new Shi'a-specific identity represents the convergence of Shi'a political and religious mythology with Western liberal discourses of "equality", "justice", and "minority rights". The discourse of "Shi'a Rights" is a direct product of this encounter, and thus lies at the heart of contemporary articulations of the Shi'a subject within the diasporic imaginary. Moreover, the rise of "Shi'a Rights" is fundamental both to the production of the Shi'a subject as an *ethical subject* and to the unconscious sectarianisation of that subject through the discursive prioritisation of *Shi'a* rights over those of all other minorities. In other words, while the Shi'a subject represents a *positive* articulation of Shi'a identity (where it has become a normatively "good" thing to identify as "Shi'a"), this subject also works to unconsciously (re)produce sectarianism through the necessary creation of an Other against which to define itself.

The chapter will begin by sketching the emergence of the concept of "Shi'a Rights" within the diasporic imaginary in relation to the discourses of international humanitarianism and human rights in order to argue that the former is a product of the encounter with the latter (both through globalisation and as a result of the diasporic experience itself). In this sense, the crystallisation of the sectarianised Shi'a subject as articulated through the discourse of "Shi'a Rights" should be seen as a thoroughly *modern* phenomenon; where the "modern" is understood not as the antithesis of "tradition" but rather as a preoccupation with "dominant global and transnational discourses" (Deeb, 2011: 15). In particular, the shift away from nationalistic identity categories towards a transnational and trans-ethnic conception of the Shi'a subject can be understood as a response to globalised discourses of humanitarian transcendence and religious commonality, as well as a product of the diasporic experience of encountering Shi'is from diverse ethno-national backgrounds (as explored in Chapter 3).

In this sense, the differential manifestation of the discourse of "Shi'a Rights" across contexts can be seen as productive of the specific type of Shi'a subject under investigation – a subject that is simultaneously invested in particularistic historical and political grievances while being a reflection of universalistic contemporary global power structures and discursive hegemonies. Part of this project will be to trace the ways in which the material and symbolic violence meted out to Shi'a minorities around the world (both historically and contemporaneously) has led to a distillation of a Shi'a-specific identity category through the politicisation of victimhood. For this reason, the advent of "Shi'a Rights" should be understood, at least in part, as a response to the very real threat of Shi'a persecution by non-Shi'is. This political context, in turn, has contributed to the politicisation of in- and out-group boundaries such that to be "Shi'a" increasingly means to be "not-Sunni" in ways that unconsciously (re)produce sectarian dynamics. Moreover, it is my contention that the various articulations of "Shi'aness" facilitated by the discourse of "Shi'a Rights" and its preoccupation with victimhood are productive of an *ethical* Shi'a subject, whereby to be "(a good) Shi'a" is seen as to be implicated in particular understandings of ethical subject formation.

Having thus laid the groundwork for a contextual understanding of the discourse of "Shi'a Rights" as a product of modernity (with all the difficulties and ambivalence that entails), the second part of this chapter will turn to the way in which this discourse has been institutionalised within the diasporic imaginary. For this purpose, I focus on a select number of organisations and institutions – in particular the organisation Shi'a Rights Watch – in order to highlight the ways in which the discourse of "Shi'a Rights" has become one of the dominant contemporary articulations of Shi'a-specific subjectivity. The institutionalisation of this discourse thus facilitates particular ways of being and doing "Shi'aness" that are invested in wider movements of transnational activism and humanitarianism.

Finally, I turn to the ideological implications of the discourse of "Shi'a Rights", specifically the way in which the prioritisation of *Shi'a* rights necessitates a specific and bounded understanding of "Shi'aness" that pits the ethical Shi'a subject against a threatening and antagonistic Other. Ultimately, I argue that the increasing narrowing of "Shi'a identity", as manifested by the discourse of "Shi'a Rights" is productive of an unconscious sectarianism via which "Shi'ism" is most often articulated in opposition to a negative construction of "Sunnism" as its discursive Other. To reiterate, this is not to claim that individual Shi'is themselves are sectarian – often far from it – but that sectarianism is a necessary, if unconscious, by-product of the increasing specificity of Shi'a identity as characterised by the ethical Shi'a subject.

"Shi'a Rights" in Context

Earlier in this thesis, I illuminated the ways in which the historical appeal to the martyrdom of Imam Hussain at the Battle of Karbala came to take on political overtones throughout the late twentieth century as an articulation of Shi'a persecution and suffering. While the argument in Chapter 2 focused on the various contextual and contingent political and ideological forces that worked to transform the Karbala paradigm from an originary myth into a blueprint for Shi'a self-determination, here I wish to focus instead on the ways in which this discourse of Shi'a victimhood has come to undergird what I am calling the discourse of "Shi'a Rights".

Significantly, it is my contention that the encounter with Western liberal discourses of "human rights", "justice", "equality", and "minority representation" (both as a result of the diasporic experience and of the increasing globalisation of such discourses in the contemporary moment) has worked, through the discourse of "Shi'a Rights", to construct a Shi'a subject whose contours are determined by a certain preoccupation with ethical

norms. In other words, the Shi'a subject implicated in the discourse of "Shi'a Rights" is necessarily an *ethical subject* as a result of its emergence within what Didier Fassin calls the contemporary "banalisation of moral discourse and moral sentiments" (Fassin, 2014: 433). The advent of the ethical Shi'a subject is thus inextricably intertwined with contemporary articulations of humanitarian principles, and as a result can be understood as a thoroughly modern subject, rather than as the ultimate expression of an underlying and primordial sectarian "essence".

From Human Rights to "Shi'a Rights": The Emergence of a Discourse

Since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, the concept of "human rights" has thoroughly permeated the discourse of international activism to become "the marker and measure of a global civil society embracing all 'humans'" (Stychin, 2004: 954). While a critique of the banalisation and normalisation of the notion of "human rights" falls outside of the scope of this thesis, it is important to acknowledge the extent to which this concept is itself predicated on an understanding of "humanity" that is deeply rooted in philosophical and political discursive traditions that are a heart "Western, liberal, and individualist" (Peterson, 1990: 308; cf. Hopgood, 2013).

For this reason, the globalisation of the term "human rights" can be seen both as a historical product of Western colonial and military dominance, and as a mechanism for the international enforcement of globally-recognised moral norms. As Donnelly (2007: 283) puts it: "Norm creation has been internationalised." On the other hand, the global human rights regime – what Hopgood (2013) calls "Human Rights" (capitalised) – consists of "a global structure of laws, courts, norms, and organisations that raise money, write reports, run international campaigns, open local offices, lobby governments, and claim to speak with singular authority in the name of humanity as a whole" (Hopgood,

2013: ix). The international dominance of the concept of "human rights", along with the globalisation of the "Human Rights" regime, has thus led both to the production of an international discourse through which marginalised or underrepresented individuals and groups are able to articulate their grievances, and to the creation of a supra-governmental legal and political system via which these individuals and groups are able to seek "justice" for the wrongs perpetrated against them. It is against this historical, discursive, and institutional background that the emergence of the concept of "Shi'a Rights" should be understood.

While a sense of Shi'a victimhood and exceptionalism is hardly new, and may even be considered to be integral to the faith itself (Barzegar, 2008b; Cole, 2002; Dabashi, 2011; Nasr, 2007), the incorporation of pre-existing and contemporary Shi'a grievances into a humanitarian framework based on the discourse of "human rights", is arguably a thoroughly modern phenomenon, and can only have arisen within the international political and humanitarian system that has been developed over the last fifty years. While the term "Shi'a Rights" isn't always explicitly invoked, it is my contention that the *discourse* of "Shi'a Rights" is one that is modelled on and replicates the language of international humanitarianism and human rights. In this sense, the discourse of "Shi'a Rights" can be seen, on the one hand, as a reflection of the pervasive power of humanitarian norms and, on the other, as a strategic choice by Shi'a actors that enables them to translate their specific grievances into a globally-understood normatively-inflected political discourse.

Taken together, these two facets of the discourse of "Shi'a Rights" work to produce a specific kind of Shi'a subject; one that is simultaneously invested in bracketing off a bounded and coherent concept of "Shi'aness" and in promoting the transnational and trans-ethnic facets of this "Shi'aness" in order to facilitate its spread across international

borders. Consider the following excerpt, taken from a blog post entitled "Resist Like Hussain" published on the (English-language) website of the Ahlulbayt Islamic Mission (AIM), the youth branch associated with the (Iranian-run) Islamic Centre of England. The passage is worth quoting at length:

> I finally get how "Everyday is Ashura and every land is Kerbala"[119] [sic] after reading Naomi Klein's international bestseller *Shock Doctrine* earlier this year. In this meticulously documented book, Klein laid out how extreme acts of violence perpetrated against populations around the world are not so random after all. She says they're actually the modus operandi of an elite group of capitalists bent on destablising nations and quashing all resistance in its path to plunder every corner of the globe, from Chile to Poland to Iraq.
>
> […]
>
> But there's hope. One figure who provides an antidote to these oppressive policies is Hussain, son of Fatima, for not only did his uprising against injustice survive brute force 1400 years ago but it's now gone global through continued resistance and endurance.
>
> […]
>
> Today's social justice movements energised by the 2011 Arab Spring face tanks, bullets and pepper spray and also risk subversion. They need to gain inspiration, insight and guidance from Hussain, whom Prophet Muhammad likened to a ship of salvation: "Whoever embarked upon it was saved, and whoever turned away from it perished." That's because Hussain, his family and his companions serve as role models for demonstrating how to maintain truth, dignity and resistance in the face of the most brutal forces of repression.

[119] This phrase was first coined by Iranian leftist Ali Shariati to promote a particular politicized and emancipatory interpretation of Shi'a struggle and sacrifice, and was later popularised by Ayatollah Khomeini during the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

> Upon returning home to Medina [after the Battle of Karbala], the resistance carried on as Zainab spread news about the tragedy of Kerbala, gaining supporters who handed down the story generation after generation until millions now gather on 'Ashura Day to remember Hussain's supreme sacrifice, empathise with him until grief-stricken and moved to commit to his struggle anew.
>
> […]
>
> But like Hussain then, his followers today suffer violent opposition.
>
> "Never in our history have there been such cruel attacks on religious observances," Afghan President Hamid Karzai said last year when three simultaneous explosions killed 63 people during Ashura Day rallies.
>
> Indeed, the resistance continues and will do so as long as people everywhere – of all religions, races and classes – heed Hussain's final call before succumbing to wounds alone on the dusty fields of Kerbala: "Who is out there to help me?!"
>
> As India's first President Rajendra Prasad once said: "The sacrifice of Imam Hussain is not limited to one country, or nation, but it is the hereditary state of the brotherhood of all mankind."[120]

Although this passage does not explicitly mention the phrase "Shi'a Rights", it clearly draws heavily on the discourses of international humanitarianism and human rights through the invocation of "truth, dignity, and resistance" in the face of "brutal oppression" that encompasses "the brotherhood of all mankind". Moreover, the passage represents the suturing of Shi'a religious mythology (as represented in the Karbala paradigm) with contemporary political movements and preoccupations (such as the reference to *The Shock Doctrine*, the Arab Spring, and the targeting of Shi'a worshippers in Afghanistan). In this way, the discursive logic of "Shi'a Rights" mimics that of

[120] Source: http://www.aimislam.com/resist-like-hussain/, accessed 12 July 2017.

numerous other emergent forms of international activism, from movements such as the Arab Spring (Anderson, 2011), Gay Pride (Stychin, 2004), and Black Lives Matter (Gallagher et al., 2017), to organisations that make use of such discourses to promote their own political agendas, such as the Jewish Defence League (Seibold, 1973), the Black Panthers (Cleaver and Katsiaficas, 2014), and the English Defence League (Garland and Treadwell, 2010). Indeed, as Modood notes in relation to Muslim forms of mobilisation in Britain: "the claims Muslims are making in fact parallel comparable arguments about gender or ethnic equality" (Modood, 2009: 193).

While the discursive underpinnings of the notion of "Shi'a Rights" may be rooted in an increasingly globalised orientation towards international humanitarianism and human rights, the driving force behind this emergent discourse is arguably the current political situation in the Middle East and elsewhere, where Shi'is are increasingly finding themselves on the receiving end of systematic symbolic and material violence. The rise of fundamentalist interpretation of Sunni Islam – as manifested by militant groups such as Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and more recently ISIS, Al-Shabab, and Al-Mourabitoun – in particular, has been implicated in a number of attacks specifically targeting Shi'is around the world, and has certainly compounded the pre-existing sense of Shi'a victimhood and marginalisation. It is this encounter between Shi'a politico-religious mythology (in the form of the Karbala paradigm), the globalised discourse of humanitarianism and human rights, and the ongoing persecution and killing of Shi'a minorities around the world that has arguably led to the emergence of the discourse of "Shi'a Rights"; where *to be Shi'a* is to be constructed as a specific kind of political and religious subject that is enshrined within the ethical parameters of international humanitarianism and human rights law.

"Shi'aphobia": Shi'ism as a Minority Identity

Within the diasporic imaginary, a key element constitutive of the discourse of "Shi'a Rights" is the sense of Shi'ism being a minority (politico-)religious identity, both in terms of the proportion of Shi'is to Sunnis within the global Islamic population (estimated to be between 10-15 percent) and as a result of Shi'i immigration to Western countries, where Muslims already occupy the position of marginalised ethno-religious minority. Increasingly, for British-born second- and third-generation diasporans, there is also an important extent to which their understandings of what it means to be "Shi'a" as a minority identity category is inextricably tied up with the notions of equality, justice, and human rights that (often uncritically) saturate the social, political, and media discourse in the UK. It is as a result of the combination of these factors that many of my research participants, as practicing Shi'is in Britain, expressed feeling part of "a minority within a minority" (cf. Sachedina, 1994). Combined with an enduring sense of Shi'a victimhood and persecution, which takes a historicist discursive trajectory to link the massacre of Imam Hussain and his family at the Battle of Karbala with the contemporary targeting of Shi'is around the world, this sense of Shi'ism as a persecuted minority identity is fundamental to the construction of the sectarianised Shi'a subject as implicated in the discourse of "Shi'a Rights". The emergence of the term "Shi'aphobia" is but one example of how this discourse has come to be articulated in the contemporary context.

The expression "Shi'aphobia" (modelled on and often invoked in relation to the term "Islamophobia") at once articulates a sense of Shi'a victimhood and specificity at the same time as it is imbued with implicit claims towards minority representation and equal rights that undergird the discourse of "Shi'a Rights". "Shi'aphobia" is geared towards a particular kind of audience, and makes use of a particular normative framework in which Shi'a Muslims are presented as the (undeserving) victims of (mostly) Sunni oppression. In a paper published in the *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies*

(JSIS),[121] for example, Shereen Yousuf makes the following claim regarding the nature of "Shi'aphobia" in the Western context:

> Shi'aphobia emerges in the US, Canada, and Western Europe through the normalised use of rhetorical tropes that grant the Sunni majority in these regions permission to silence, ignore, or entirely erase the realities of systematic violence against Shi'i Muslims on a global scale… conceptualising of a "Shi'aphobia" provides the discursive space to identify and name the process through which Shi'i identities and subjectivities are constructed in regions where they occupy a marginalised position. (Yousuf, 2016: 57)

This passage is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is a scholarly article published within a peer-reviewed journal (albeit one on the margins of mainstream academia) that is specifically geared towards the burgeoning field of "Shi'a studies". On the journal's website, for example, it states that JSIS "conscientiously aims to provide a scholarly platform for critical and informed articles in all fields of Shi'a studies."[122] Unlike the wider and better-known discipline of Islamic studies, the emerging field of *Shi'a* studies specifically marks out Shi'a Islam as a separate entity worthy of study in its own right at the same time as it implicitly decries the mainstream field of Islamic Studies for not duly recognising the beliefs and practices of Shi'a Muslims (for if it did, why the need for a separate field of study?). In this sense, the field of "Shi'a studies" can itself be seen as an attempt to bracket-off the Shi'a experience in a way that prioritises Shi'a-specific identities and subjectivities and constructs them as being qualitatively and analytically different from the experiences of other Muslims.

[121] An academic journal published by the London-based (and Iranian-funded) Islamic College of Advanced Studies (ICAS).
[122] Source: https://www.islamic-college.ac.uk/publications/jsis/#1465231226842-e4eb524c-4585, accessed 13 July 2017.

Secondly, the construction of "Shi'aphobia" as a "hegemonic discourse" that is manipulated by the "Sunni majority" to "silence" the lived reality of Shi'a suffering and persecution (ibid: 40-41) is reflective of a number of contemporary discursive trends. Such an iteration simultaneously lays the blame for Shi'a-targeted violence at the door of the "Sunni majority" (without attesting to the multiplicity and nuances of Sunni Islam) at the same time as it glosses over the heterogeneity of Shi'a experience to present an essentialised image of the Shi'a-as-victim. By advocating the conceptualisation of "Shi'aphobia" as a "discursive space" through which to understand "Shi'a identities and subjectivities" around the world, the very real threat of Shi'a persecution in various countries is, in this iteration, decontextualised from its specific manifestations and instead constructed as a global phenomenon of "systematic violence" against Shi'is perpetrated by the "Sunni majority". Notwithstanding the reality of both symbolic and material violence meted out to Shi'a minorities in various parts of the world, Yousuf's articulation of "Shi'aphobia" works to flatten, rather than highlight, the diversity of both Shi'a and Sunni Islam; discursively constructing the two Islamic sects as locked in an eternal confrontation in which the Shi'a are always imagined as the victim and the Sunnis as the aggressor.

This preoccupation with Shi'a victimhood (both real and imagined), I would like to suggest, forms the discursive core of the concepts of both "Shi'aphobia" and "Shi'a Rights" that is productive of a particular kind of sectarianised Shi'a subject-as-victim that is defined in opposition to a quintessentially antagonistic Sunni Other. For example, throughout my fieldwork I frequently encountered stories and anecdotes regarding the relative status and recognition of Shi'a minorities (in Britain and elsewhere), often accompanied with a condemnation of Sunni discrimination directed towards Shi'is. One of my interviewees, G – a middle-aged Iraqi woman who works part-time as an Arabic

teacher in a Shi'a Saturday school in Willesden – told me that the reason she started teaching was that she wanted her son to learn Arabic but refused to send him to a mainstream Islamic school following a negative experience with a Sunni teacher:

> But the teacher, I think he was Pakistani, told [my son] that the Shi'a were infidel. Can you believe it? He was saying that the Shi'a do this and this, and that is why they are not true believers, and my son, who was only five years old at the time, tried to argue with him and said: "We're Shi'a and we don't do that!" (Interview 18)

A similar narrative is given by a young British-born Shi'a man describing an incident in the (Sunni dominated) Regent's Park Mosque:

> The other day somebody went to Regent's Park Mosque, they put down a *torba*, they wanted to pray, they kicked it in front of him – from in front of him! (Interview 6)

This sense of a lack of understanding and/or compassion for Shi'is by the Sunni majority is not limited to the experience of Shi'is in the UK, as reflected in a blog post published by a US-based Shi'i woman on the interfaith website *Patheos*:

> Years of intrafaith discussions with not-so-veiled questions have taught me that Sunni Muslims are suspicious of the degree to which to which we [Shi'is] love the Ahlul-Bayt, suggesting that we have made them "God-like," which is clearly un-Islamic. In my humble opinion, this discomfort stems from Sunni-centric approach to how certain figures are revered in relation to *Tawhid*. As a Shi'a, I feel that the narrations, supplications, and general literature attached to the Ahlul-

> Bayt are crucial in drawing me closer to Allah, especially given the degree to which many of them were marginalised themselves and expressed devotion to Allah from that positionality. This is important to recognise because here in the U.S., Sunni Muslims occupy the "normative" position and homogenise what it means to be Muslim on the basis of their sect.[123]

This sense of Sunni dominance thus transcends the specificity of the British domestic experience and rather speaks to a sense of marginalisation by Shi'is in various parts of the world, which in turn works to constitute the discursive contours of the Shi'a subject produced in the transnational diasporic imaginary. Such anecdotes, while reflective of personal experiences, draw on the same discursive tropes that underpin articulations of "Shi'aphobia" and "Shi'a Rights"; namely, the experience of Shi'a victimhood and persecution by the Sunni majority. Although the terms "Shi'aphobia" and "Shi'a Rights" are not explicitly used in any of these examples, the narratives given here are clearly embedded in the same discursive hegemony from which these terms have emerged. Moreover, the sense of injustice and discrimination articulated by these individuals underlies an orientation towards a Shi'a-specific identity category that can positively affirm itself in the face of such antagonism. In this sense, the concept of "Shi'aphobia" works to produce a specific kind of Shi'a subject invested in the politics of emancipation and visibility. Many of my research participants articulated a sense that Shi'a Muslims needed to "speak out" or to "show that we have a voice", especially within the context of diasporic Britain where they felt the need to distinguish themselves from pejorative conceptions of (Sunni) Islam reflected in mainstream media and political discourse (recall the discussion in Chapter 3).

[123] Source: http://www.patheos.com/blogs/hindtrospectives/2015/07/shi'aphobia-at-the-intersection-and-why-it-matters/, accessed 13 July 2017

The terms "Shi'a Rights" and "Shi'aphobia" are thus productive of a discursive space via which specific understandings of "Shi'aness" as a minority identity are able to find articulation. Take the following example, an excerpt from a blog post written on *The Muslim Vibe* by young British Pakistani Zameer Hussain and entitled "How I Tackled Shi'aphobia at School":

> I started my career as a Religious Education (RE) teacher in September 2013 in a school that has nearly 1500 pupils ranging from the ages of 11-18. Of these pupils, approximately 75% of them come from a Muslim background. Due to the nature of comments Shi'as usually have to endure, I chose to hide my identity as a Shi'a Muslim from my pupils… Perhaps I was insecure about it. My main concern was the possible reaction that I have endured in my life after telling people I am a follower of the Shi'a school of thought. As I had just started my career, I didn't want my confidence to be harmed.
>
> Fast-forward to September 2014, I was (somehow) appointed as Head of RE at my school and I was now in charge of the curriculum, results, teaching and progress of every pupil in the school who studies RE as well as the members of staff who teach it. With the spiritual boost from my experience of going to Karbala that year during Arba'een under my belt, I was now not afraid of displaying my faith and I slowly started to reveal to my pupils (using subtle hints and comments) the beliefs I held. I would pray in the prayer room with my hands down, get asked questions about the ring and wristbands I wear with the names "Ali" and "Hussain" written on them and about why I take a day off work for religious purposes (for 'Ashura) when the rest of the school's Muslims come in. Now when the pupils would ask me whether I was a Sunni or Shi'a, I would give a straight answer and then ask a question back: "Has that changed your opinion of me?" The reactions were surreal and comical, from the literal jaw-drop to the surprise and

> amazement… My experience is summed up by a comment two pupils made to me a few weeks ago:
>
> "Sir, I'm not going to lie. We have heard some crazy things about Shi'a Muslims but you have made us realise you are normal and how many of those things we were told were wrong."
>
> I do not want the readers of this article to think I am some sort of Shi'a preacher at my workplace; this goes against the standards of the profession I adhere to. This is the way I approach all subjects I teach. As well as removing "Shi'aphobia", my curriculum also aims to remove Islamophobia in general, anti-Semitism and all other forms of prejudice and discrimination towards people of faith or non-faith. However, from a personal point of view, Shi'a Muslims are being killed because of misconceptions, as are others. I am in the lucky position to help change this maybe.[124]

Here, the author traces a personal journey which begins with his reluctance to reveal his "Shi'aness" to his (mostly Sunni Muslim) students, and ends with his acceptance and pride in identifying with, articulating, performing, and displaying his minority religious identity. The parallels between this narrative and similar stories of individuals coming to terms with and speaking publically about their sexual, political, gendered, disabled, or ethno-racial identities is striking, and places Zameer's story within a recognisable discursive trope: the "coming-out discourse" and the "processes of liberation and self-actualisation" that this entails (Samuels, 2003: 235). As Swain and Cameron (1999) argue in relation to "coming out" as disabled:

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[124] Source: https://themuslimvibe.com/muslim-lifestyle-matters/education/how-i-tackled-shi'aphobia-at-school, accessed 13 July 2017.

> Coming out… is a process of redefinition of one's personal identity through rejecting the tyranny of the *normate*, positive recognition of impairment and embracing disability as a valid social identity. Having come out, the disabled person no longer regards disability as a reason for self-disgust, or as something to be denied or hidden, but rather as an imposed oppressive social category to be challenged and broken down… Coming out, in our analysis, involves a political commitment. (Swain and Cameron, 1999; quoted in Samuels, 2003: 237)

Zameer's experience of "coming out" as Shi'a at his school thus mimics the logic of other coming-out discourses, and represents a *positive* articulation of Shi'a religious belief that envisages "Shi'aness" as a liberatory and emancipatory minority identity. Moreover, as Swain and Cameron make explicit, coming out should be understood as a "*political commitment*" (my emphasis) to a specific way of being and performing minority identities – in this case, that of "Shi'aness". In other words, the discourse of "coming out" employed in the above example underlies a specific manifestation of the Shi'a subject that is both particularistic and discursively bounded in opposition to (Sunni) antagonism, and thus invested in the politics of identity and sectarianism.

Through such examples, it is possible to see how the concept of "Shi'aphobia" functions discursively in much the same way as that of "Shi'a Rights"; working to promote a sense of Shi'a specificity and exceptionalism through the invocation of global discourses of humanitarianism and human rights. After all, just as "Shi'a Rights" could be incorporated by the term "human rights" (since Shi'is, too, are human beings), so could "Shi'aphobia" be adequately represented and articulated through the concept of "Islamophobia" – the need to present and articulate separate, Shi'a-specific terms thus speaks of a preoccupation with a bounded and coherent sense of "Shi'aness" that can be upheld as a minority identity in its own right. Moreover, both these discourses work to produce a

specific kind of Shi'a subject predicated on an ethical commitment to international humanitarianism and global liberal norms. It is to this ethical Shi'a subject that I now turn.

Shaping the Ethical Shi'a Subject

In Chapter 2, I explored how the politicisation of the Karbala paradigm was key to the development of a Shi'a-specific ethics of piety and mobilisation. Here, I wish instead to turn to the ways in which this Shi'a ethics has been imbued with the discourses of international humanitarianism and human rights within the contemporary moment to produce an ethical Shi'a subject that combines the religious mythology of Shi'ism with the moral authority of (secular) liberal norms. In particular, I am interested in tracing the ways in which the ethical imperative to "*be (a good) Shi'a*" is implicated in contemporary power structures and discursive alignments and constitutes a form of subject formation that has led to the crystallisation of an ethical Shi'a subject that is simultaneously (and seemingly paradoxically) invested in both secularism and sectarianism.

While the globalisation of (Western) liberal norms through the spread of international humanitarianism and the human rights regime has certainly contributed to contemporary articulations of the Shi'a subject, it is my contention that this subject is also heavily imbued with the political and social realities of the modern secular state – especially when it comes to the everyday experiences of diasporic Shi'is living in countries that adopt such secular forms of governance and governmentality. As Mahmood (2015: 3) argues: "Secularism… is not simply the organising structure for what are regularly taken to be a priori elements of social organisation – public, private, political, religious – but a discursive operation of power that generates these very spheres, establishes their boundaries, and suffuses them with content, such that they

come to acquire a natural quality for those living within its terms." In the diasporic imaginary, the encounter between secular discursive power and Shi'a politico-religious ethics has arguably resulted in the emergence of a particular kind of ethical Shi'a subject predicated on the discursive logic of secular humanitarianism. As outlined elsewhere in this thesis, ethics understood as the ensemble of behaviours geared towards self-betterment is ultimately a practice of *subject formation*; one that "simultaneously shapes and is shaped by the political choices and the moral economies of contemporary societies" (Fassin, 2009: 48) – in other words, one that is invested in and reflective of contemporary political power alignments.

The discourse of "Shi'a Rights" thus combines elements of both a Shi'a-specific ethics of piety and emancipation with the secular logic of liberal humanitarianism. For example, while a sense of Shi'a victimhood, as I argue above, is key to the formation of the ethical Shi'a subject, the language and discourses through which this victimhood is articulated are increasingly being stripped of their specific Shi'a religious content and mimic instead the language of international social and humanitarian movements. Throughout my fieldwork, I repeatedly came across the use of terms such as "injustice", "tyranny", "atrocities", "genocide", and "Holocaust" to describe both historical and contemporary acts of violence against Shi'a minorities. One interviewee even told me that he thought the Shi's needed to be "more like the Jews" in terms of raising international awareness regarding atrocities committed against them:

> Under Saddam, the *tasfiraat* and mass graves of 1990-99 were like a genocide, but the Shi'a haven't made use of it. Even now, everyone's talking about the Christians and Yazidis, but not [about] the Shi'a. (Interview 7)

Speaking not long after the massacre of an estimated 1,500 Shi'a air force cadets at Camp Speicher by ISIS forces,[125] another interviewee expressed a similar sentiment, saying that: "We need more coverage of events like this so people understand what is happening" (Interview 9). Interestingly, neither interviewee explicitly draws on Shi'a religious mythology or the Karbala paradigm here, instead choosing to express a sense of Shi'a victimhood in the secular language of international activism and humanitarianism. In this sense, the concept of "Shi'a Rights" implicitly invoked by both speakers can be seen as part of a wider discursive network of Shi'a activism and mobilisation based on the logic of international humanitarianism and human rights. Consider the following passage, taken from an online article produced by the Ahlulbayt Islamic Mission (AIM) and entitled "Why the Genocide Against the Shi'a?":

> Today we witness the Shi'a genocide in Pakistan which is the product of a twisted mentality systematically promoted by the US and its puppet Arab regimes. Yesterday we witnessed the start of an ongoing oppression and bloodshed of Shi'as in Bahrain. It would also be worthwhile to remember the Shi'as in Iraq, particularly at the time of Saddam Husain's corrupted [sic] regime. And who knows who will be the next target tomorrow among the Shi'as? Over the course of history, thousands and thousands of Shi'a believers have been killed, tortured, their body parts severed, their belongings looted, their women violated and their children orphaned without any mercy or compassion.[126]

[125] Camp Speicher is an Iraqi military academy in Tikrit, northern Iraq. In June 2014, the camp was captured by advancing ISIS forces, who systematically killed between 1,500-1,700 of the 3,000 resident cadets. Although accounts of what happened vary, most sources agree that the cadets were separated according to sect and that ISIS forces specifically targeted those of Shi'a Muslim background.

[126] Source: http://www.aimislam.com/why-the-genocide-against-shi'as/, accessed 23 January 2017.

Again, the language here, while echoing elements of the Karbala paradigm, is predominantly rooted in the (liberal, secular) discourse of humanitarianism; with key linguistic signifiers including "genocide", "oppression", "bloodshed", "corrupt[ion]", "mercy", and "compassion". Such discursive positioning, drawing heavily on empathy and pathos, thus seeks to render the specificity of the Shi'a experience intelligible to a global audience at the same time as it is productive of an ethical imperative to "*be good*". It is this combination of secular humanitarianism and Shi'a ethics that undergirds contemporary articulations of the Shi'a subject as an ahistorical, transnational, and trans-ethnic discursive alignment.

For individual practicing Shi'is, the ethical imperative to "be (a good) Shi'a" thus increasingly blurs into and becomes interchangeable with the ethical imperative to "be (a) good (Shi'a)" – i.e. from one productive of the *Shi'a* politico-religious subject to an ethical self-transformation undergirded by a preoccupation with secular liberal humanitarianism. This is especially visible in the increasing transformation of the Karbala paradigm and the memory of Imam Hussain from a Shi'a-specific politico-religious myth to a model for ethical behaviour and self-improvement applicable to all humanity (regardless of their religious affiliation). For example, the 2014 'Ashura march in London, I was handed the following flyer:

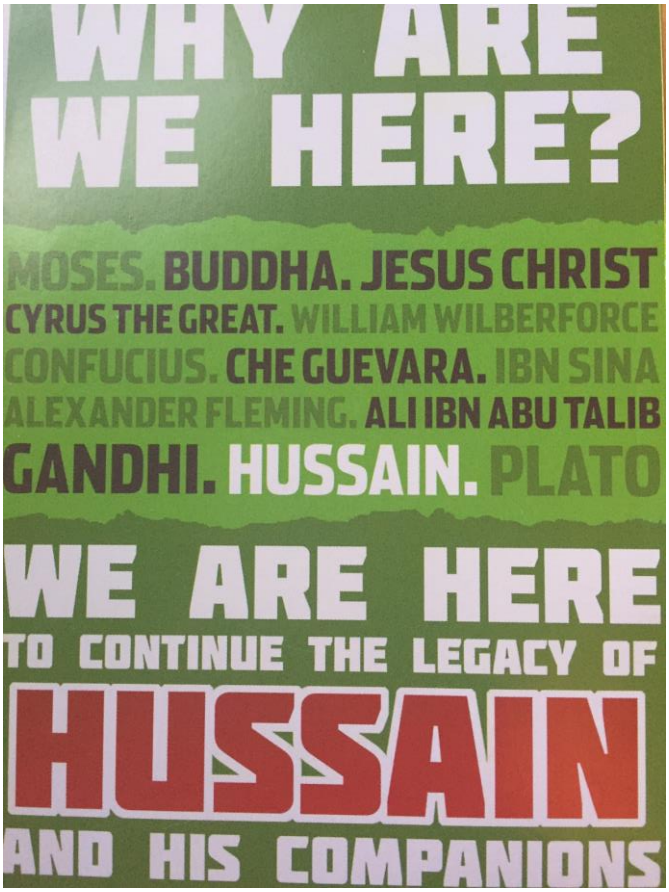

Fig. 4 – "Why Are We Here?"
Source: Author's fieldnotes

This flyer is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is clearly aimed at the non-Shi'a public who might not know what the march is about, as evidenced by the title "Why are we here?" Secondly, the juxtaposition of historical personalities such as Gandhi, Moses, Buddha, Plato, and Confucius with the figure of Imam Hussain simultaneously places the Shi'a religious ritual of 'Ashura within a discursive field intelligible to the average member of the UK public at the same time as it implicitly invokes the logic of liberal humanitarianism with which these figures are associated. Moreover, all of the historical personalities mentioned are internationally-known either for their commitment to intellectual and spiritual betterment (Plato, Alexander Fleming, Confucius) or for their struggle against tyranny and oppression (Moses, Jesus Christ, Buddha, Gandhi, etc.). The flyer thus represents an example of contemporary Shi'a ethical subject formation, where the grievances of Shi'a Muslims have been separated

from their specific politico-religious origins and translated into a language of self-betterment and emancipation intelligible to a global audience.

Similarly, during the 2014 Arba'een march in London, several volunteers walked up and down Park Lane handing out roses to members of the public which were accompanied by a tag bearing the following message:

> **Hussain's Epic Legacy Inspires Millions**
>
> Hussain inspires me to…
>
> Give back.
>
> Be caring to all of humanity.
>
> Care for people around me.
>
> Stay strong in what I stand for.
>
> Help those less fortunate than me.
>
> Resist oppression in all forms.
>
> *What will your legacy be?*[127]

Again, the message here combines elements of Shi'a religious piety with an ethical imperative aimed at self-betterment and founded on a logic of secular humanitarianism. In particular, the final rhetorical question ("What will your legacy be?") encourages the reader to engage in similar practices of ethical improvement by continuing the "legacy" of Imam Hussain's philosophy and behaviour. Such examples point to the way in which the construction of the Shi'a subject as an *ethical* subject is increasingly embedded in a (secular, liberal) discourse of international humanitarianism and human rights oriented towards specific kinds of self-betterment. While this subject is thus embedded in the

[127] Message produced by the Who Is Hussain? campaign and handed out during the 2014 London Arba'een march. Source: Author's fieldnotes.

discourse of secular liberalism, it nevertheless is a profoundly *religious* subject, and is invested with specific notions of Shi'a piety and ethics – it is for this reason that I believe, following Deeb (2011), that it is a mistake to claim religion and secularism as radically opposed to one another when in such instances they manifest as two facets of the same process of subject formation.

Having outlined the various discursive contours undergirding the concept of "Shi'a Rights" and its role in the production of the ethical Shi'a subject, I now turn to examine the various organisations that make use of this discourse in order to explore how the institutionalisation of "Shi'a Rights" is increasingly implicated in a global network of Shi'a activism and mobilisation that has contributed to the (unconscious) sectarianisation of the contemporary Shi'a subject.

Institutionalising "Shi'a Rights"

The discourse of "Shi'a Rights" thus sets up an ethical imperative founded on the (secular) logic of international humanitarianism in which to be "a good Shi'a" is commensurate with "being a good person". This discourse undergirds a growing web of international Shi'a organisations and institutions (many of which actively make use of pre-existing Shi'a transnational religious and organisational networks) that actively seek to raise awareness of "Shi'a Rights" and human rights abuses perpetrated against Shi'is around the world. Perhaps the most prominent of these is the organisation Shi'a Rights Watch (SRW), a US-based advocacy and lobbying group loosely modelled on Human Rights Watch.

Shi'a Rights Watch

Founded in 2011 by self-styled "Shi'a Sentinel" Mustafa Akhwand, an Iraqi-Iranian born in 1980 and naturalised as a US citizen in 2008, SRW claims to "protect the rights of Shi'a

Muslims worldwide" through media monitoring, documenting "violations against Shi'a communities", canvassing, and advocacy campaigns such as International Shi'a Day. The organisation also publishes monthly statistical analyses of "anti-Shi'a incidents", which are aggregated into bi-annual reports documenting "human rights violations towards Shi'a people", as well as running a mobile app detailing country-specific information on the treatment of Shi'a Muslims. SRW's motto, displayed prominently on their website and all marketing material, is: "Defending Justice and Rights".

In the "About Us" section of SRW's official website, the organisation outlines its vision and scope in the following words:

> Shi'a Rights Watch… is the world's first independent organisation dedicated to define and protect the rights of Shi'a Muslims around the world. SRW is a non-governmental, not-for-profit research entity and advocacy group headquartered in Washington D.C. U.S.A. Shi'a Rights Watch holds a 501(c) status, as well as a Special consultation status (ECOSOC) with the United Nations. Shi'a Rights Watch aims to draw international attention to countries where Shi'a rights are violated. *The aim is to give a voice to the oppressed and hold oppressors accountable for their crimes*. SRW achieves its objectives through strategic investigations supported by *targeted advocacy* in order to bring about *informed action*.[128]

Here, the language and norms of the international human rights regime is used to frame the issue of "Shi'a Rights" as one that is both *international* and that requires certain forms of *ethical action*. Moreover, this call to action is codified and institutionalised according to the normative hegemony of the United Nations and the global human rights discourse.

[128] Source: http://shiarightswatch.org/about-us/, accessed 2 January 2017 (emphasis added).

In the words of SRW founder Mustafa Akhwand, one of the key missions of the organisation is to mobilise the language and institutions of the global human rights regime in a way that specifically addresses the rights of Shi'a Muslims: "There was [already] a language of human rights to talk about humans in general, but there was no way to talk about what was happening to the Shi'a in a way that people [could] understand… We [SRW] are working for the rights of everyone, but specifically for the rights of the Shi'a" (Interview 30).

This linguistic move – in which "the rights of the Shi'a" are equated with "the rights of everyone" – is indicative of the underlying logic of the discourse of "Shi'a Rights", where an appeal to international humanitarianism is used to draw attention to the specific grievances of Shi'a Muslims in ways that are reflective of other international activist movements (Gallagher et al., 2017; Lettinga and van Troost, 2014; Risse and Sikkink, 1999; Seibold, 1973; Seif, 2014; Stychin, 2004). Although there is certainly an extent to which this is a strategic choice by SRW in order to make Shi'a grievances intelligible to an international audience, it is my contention that the invocation of international humanitarian norms has also been internalised in the formation of the ethical Shi'a subject such that being "Shi'a" has become synonymous with being "good". To further emphasise this point, consider the following, also taken from SRW's website:

> SRW stands up for victims of prejudice, and supports activism in order to prevent discrimination, support political freedom, and help ensure *people's human rights and religious freedom*. SRW enlists the local public and international communities to support the cause of *human rights for all*.[129]

[129] ibid. (emphasis added)

Here, the claim to Shi'a specificity is all but dropped entirely, and the emphasis is on "people", "the public", "international communities" and "human rights for all"; thus equating Shi'a rights with human rights*, tout court*. By explicitly invoking claims of moral universalism and international humanitarianism, SRW is working to discursively produce a Shi'a subject that is increasingly divorced from its religious roots and instead constructed as secular preoccupation with ethical self-betterment. In order to further explore this, it is worth considering two advocacy campaigns run by SRW, and the way in which the discursive parameters set by the organisation have been replicated across different contexts. The first of these is the institutionalisation of International Shi'a Day, while the second is the campaign to have the term "Anti-Shi'ism" recognised as the official term for anti-Shi'a discrimination.

International Shi'a Day

> International Shi'a day intends to increase awareness about the struggles, rights, and achievements of Shi'a Muslims. This population is an underrepresented minority, violated against and marginalised. Global action is needed to accelerate Shi'a rights.[130]

International Shi'a Day is an annual advocacy and awareness campaign run by SRW that takes place on the 12 June and which began in 2015 as a response to the massacre of Shi'a air force cadets by ISIS forces at Camp Speicher in Iraq on 12 June 2014.[131] Since 2015, International Shi'a Day has expanded to include both off- and online activism through campaigns such as "Roses for Roses" (a scheme that involves volunteers handing out 550 roses for two consecutive days "as a metaphorical representation of the 550 imprisoned youth in Bahrain"), public pledges by celebrities and prominent human rights activists,

[130] http://internationalshiaday.com, accessed 12 January 2017.
[131] The event is upheld by SRW as "the most prolific sectarian mass killing against Shi'as since the time of Saddam Hussain's rule." (SRW)

and a social media campaign using the hashtags #612Shi'aDay and #IntShi'aDay. The campaign also includes a YouTube video entitled "How to Become a Real Hero" that details the steps required for individuals to get involved in the work of SRW:

Fig. 5 – Screen grab of campaign video for International Shi'a Rights Day.[132]

Much like the overall mission of SRW, International Shi'a Day and the campaign surrounding it can be seen to replicate much of the same language and discourse of "human rights" and the associated ethical imperative to "be good" (constructed here as being a "hero"). In the screen grab of the video above, for example, of the "4 easy steps" to becoming a "hero", two specifically refer to the issue of "human rights", including a call for people to become trained human rights professionals. Later in the video, the same breezy tone and cheery stick-figure are juxtaposed with graphic images of violence and suffering, including rows of bloodstained body-bags and gaunt vacant-eyed children pictured standing in dusty streets strewn with rubbish. The video ends with the phrase: "Millions of Shi'a Muslim victims are counting on you."

[132] Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WQFjlmIlJ_Y, accessed 14 January 2017

The language and format of the International Shi'a Day campaign is thus familiar to those accustomed to the strategies of NGOs and human rights organisations (images of body bags and starving children being particular and much-critiqued favourites). Indeed, it is is precisely this familiarity – this mirroring of the language and strategies of the international human rights regime – that works to produce the Shi'a subject as an *ethical* subject. Moreover, despite the seemingly *a*political language employed by SRW and the campaigns around International Shi'a Day, there is an important sense in which the Shi'a subject being produced by these discourses is profoundly political, especially to the extent to which it is invested in a specific way of *being* and *doing* (ethical) "Shi'aness".

However, this political facet of "Shi'a Rights" is rarely acknowledged within the discourse itself (much as the political nature of humanitarianism is rarely acknowledged by international human rights organisations). As Mustafa Akhwand stressed to me, SRW is "not a political but a human rights organisation" that "seeks to combat" what he sees as an ingrained "political and ideological view of the Shi'a" and to foreground Shi'a rights as akin to the right to religious freedom. Indeed, Mustafa repeatedly expressed his view that "the Shi'a are being oppressed *because* they are Shi'a" (Interview 30). While this may be partially and contextually true in some instances (at Camp Speicher, for example, the cadets were reportedly divided up according to their sectarian affiliation), such an assertion also obscures the fact that much of the anti-Shi'a discrimination and violence taking place across the Muslim world is a direct result of *political*, not religious, factors. To speak of violence or discrimination against Shi'a Muslims in Iraq, Syria, Bahrain, Lebanon, Nigeria, or elsewhere without due acknowledgment of the socio-political factors at play in each of these contexts is all but meaningless, and arguably reproduces an essentialised understanding of Shi'a Islam that casts Shi'is as the eternal victims via recourse to the mythological force of the Karbala paradigm. Consider Mustafa's response

when I asked him whether SRW might be contributing to a perceived Shi'a "resurgence"[133] in the Middle East and elsewhere:

> Shi'a oppression has existed for 1,400 years. But in recent years, especially after the revolution in Iran, Shi'as [have] got a better sense of how to make their voices heard and to speak to the international community. (Interview 30)

In this way, the presentation of anti-Shi'a discrimination devoid of any context or understanding – such as in the showcasing of rows of blood-stained body bags without any mitigating information, or the claim that Shi'a Muslims constitute "an underrepresented minority, violated against and marginalised" – constructs Shi'a victimhood both as a quality inherent to the belief and practice of Shi'a Islam ("the Shi'a are being oppressed *because* they are Shi'a") and as an immutable fact that has existed since time immemorial through the invocation of the Karbala paradigm ("Shi'a oppression has existed for 1,400 years"). While religious and political discrimination, persecution, and violence is certainly a very real threat for many Shi'is around the world – indeed, the recent rise of Shi'a-targeted violence by ISIS in Iraq is a case in point – the point here is not to prove or disprove the veracity of such claims, but rather to show the way in which the decontextualistion of Shi'a violence and oppression from the political and social circumstances in which it arises results in a kind of essentialisation of Shi'ism predicated on an enduring and fetishized sense of victimhood.

To be Shi'a in Iraq, or in Syria, for example, comes with a whole palimpsest of other meanings and associations that cannot be divorced from the context in which they arise. For this reason, to speak of persecution against Shi'as as a "global" phenomenon that is

[133] For a discussion of the (problematic) notion of a Shi'a "resurgence" or waxing "Shi'a crescent", see Barzegar (2008a, 2008b), Bröning (2008), Cockburn (2008), Machlis (2014), Nasr (2004, 2006, 2007), Terhalle (2007), Walker (2006).

simply reducible to religious sect runs the risk of reproducing exactly the kind of essentialist sectarian logic it initially seeks to avoid. As one of my research participants pointed out, from the perspective of a Sunni Iraqi living in a working-class area of Baghdad and whose family were killed by Shi'a militias in the civil war, for example, the concept of Shi'a-specific victimhood would be all but empty, if not perceived as downright "insulting".[134] In this sense, the discourse of "Shi'a Rights", as exemplified by campaigns such as International Shi'a Day works in part to obscure, rather than explain, the causes of anti-Shi'a discrimination.

Moreover, the move towards the essentialising of "Shi'aness" through the fetishization of victimhood projected on a "global" scale begs the question as to the intended audience of the discourse of "Shi'a Rights". Indeed, it would seem that the purpose of this discourse is not necessarily to give a voice to the "persecuted" Shi'a Muslims themselves around the world who are denied basic rights and therefore unlikely to have access to the kinds of channels through which SRW operates? Rather, this discourse is explicitly addressed to what Mustafa Akhwand calls "the international community", a rather nebulous term that seems to encompass the United Nations, US Department of State, international human rights organisations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, and Western-educated individuals familiar with the kinds of language and strategies employed. In other words, the discourse of "Shi'a Rights" works to construct Shi'ism and Shi'aness as a political identity worthy of representation on the international stage – a fundamentally strategic choice that nevertheless requires glossing over the nuances and heterogeneity inherent within Shi'a Islam itself in order to make "Shi'a identity" intelligible to a global audience. To further exemplify this point, it is worth turning to another facet of SRW's advocacy work that I believe exemplifies the kinds of subject-

[134] Informal conversation with M Madani, 14 January 2017.

formation operating within the discourse of "Shi'a Rights": that of the institutionalisation of the term "Anti-Shi'ism".

Anti-Shi'ism

In 2011, SRW began a campaign to have the word "Anti-Shi'ism" recognised as the official term for any form of discrimination or violence against Shi'a Muslims. In a press release dated 18 April, 2012, the organisation spelled out its reasoning for the campaign, which bears quoting at length:

> **A New Term in the Human Rights Field**
>
> The term "Anti-Shi'ism" means prejudice against or hatred of Shi'a Muslims. The term was first introduced by Shi'a Rights Watch in 2011. The act of Anti-Shi'ism, however, has a long history.
>
> **Shi'a in History**
>
> Shi'a have a long history of facing injustice. Ever since the death of the Prophet of Islam, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), Shi'a have faced discrimination because they criticised the Caliphs for unjust and violent acts. Shi'a advocated non-violence and equal human rights for all; the Caliphs, on the other hand, neglected people's basic human rights. The growth of these ideological differences led to the formation of anti-Shi'a extremist groups, such as the Wahabbi, Salafi and Nasebi[135] sects. Many Shi'a have lost their freedom, dignity, and lives throughout history at the hands of such groups. Eleven out of the twelve Shi'a Imams and their companions were murdered by either anti-Shi'a groups or dictators. It can therefore be concluded that Anti-Shi'ism has been a threat to Shi'a since the death of the Prophet Muhammad.

[135] A colloquial Arabic term meaning "those who have hatred" that is sometimes to refer to certain branches of Sunni Islam who are perceived as preaching hatred of the Ahlulbayt (similar to the term *takfiri*).

Current Situation

In recent years, with the financial support of Saudi Arabia, Anti-Shi'ism has increased dramatically throughout the world and includes: the demolition of Shi'a shrines in Saudi Arabia; attacks on Shi'a homes in Bahrain; the mass killing of Shi'a in Pakistan; road bombs in Shi'a-populated areas of Syria and Iraq; targeted attacks on Shi'a and Alawies [sic] in Damascus; and the destruction of Shi'a homes in Indonesia and pressure on Shi'a in Malaysia to convert.

Anti-Shi'ism: A Growing Phenomenon

Anti-Shi'ism is gaining support in many places which is a serious cause for concern. As the odious ideology continues to spread, it has infiltrated media outlets and human rights organisations which continue to ignore the plight of Shi'a Muslims.

Anti-Shi'ism and the Media

The most modern and disappointing example of Anti-Shi'ism can be witnessed in the Media coverage, or lack thereof, of Shi'a suffering. Since the Arab Spring, Shi'a have been threatened by extremists, thousands have been murdered and injured, many Shi'a women and children have been arrested and tortured, and historical sites have been demolished and desecrated. Yet, many media outlets remain silent in the face of such inhumane acts against Shi'a Muslims.

Anti-Shi'ism and Human Rights Organisations

Since the beginning of the 2011 uprising in Middle East, as anti-Shi'ism flared in the Middle East, SRW contacted many human rights organisations to take action to stop the violence against Shi'a, however no serious action has been taken. As a result the number of murders is increasing every day in countries such as Saudi

> Arabia, Bahrain, Syria, Pakistan, Indonesia and Malaysia... Yet, many human rights organisations remain silent and do not get involved. [136]

This passage is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, "Anti-Shi'ism" is presented as a historical fact that dates from the death of the Prophet Muhammad and extends to the contemporary geopolitics of the Middle East; notwithstanding the fact that the very notion of "human rights" is arguably a relatively modern phenomenon (Hopgood, 2013; Ignatieff and Gutmann, 2003; Macrae, 1998). This coherent narrative, with its echoes of the Karbala paradigm, presents Shi'a victimhood as inherent to Shi'a beliefs and practices, and constructs Shi'ism as a pure and untarnished religion invested in "non-violence and equal human rights to all". According to this narrative, Shi'is are presented as long-suffering, silenced, violated, and victimised by a never-ending cast of "evil" characters, from the Caliphs of early Islam through to the media and human rights organisations in the contemporary moment.[137] This rhetorical strategy mirrors the discursive paradigms used by numerous minority groups in calls for communal self-representation – most notably Jewish activist movements such as the Jewish Defence League who regularly label their critics as "Anti-Semitic" as a way of silencing them (Seibold, 1973) – and arguably works to produce a Shi'a subject that is invested in an essentialised and fetishized sense of Shi'a victimhood predicated on the moral authority of international humanitarianism.

Such anti-historicism is further enforced via a narrative arc that equates human rights violations with certain branches of Sunni Islam (specifically Wahhabism and Salafism),

[136] (Shi'a Rights Watch, 2012)

[137] It should be noted, however, that especially in the context of the Syrian civil war, the narrative expounded by the vast majority of media networks (including the BBC and Al Jazeera) does indeed gloss over the targeting of Shi'is and Alawis in Syria; but this is likely the result of the politics of the conflict itself, and not an inherent act of discrimination against Shi'is per se, as presented by SRW.

which are labelled as "Nasebi". The term "nasebi" is a pejorative Arabic colloquialism meaning "those who have hatred" and is used to refer to those who bear hatred for the AhlulBayt (incidentally, even Salafis and Wahhabis revere the family of the Prophet on a doctrinal level). The use of such a term by SRW is interesting, since it places the organisation within a specific politically-invested Shi'a sectarian discourse that is propagated by a number of radical scholars and thinkers.[138] Moreover, the explicit denunciation of Saudi Arabia as the financial backer of "Anti-Shi'ism" immediately places SRW on a particular political spectrum (since it could equally be argued, in a similar vein, that "anti-Sunnism" is backed and financed by Iran) and undermines the organisation's claims to be apolitical. Again, this is reflective of numerous international activist movements, especially those that seek to put forward claims regarding minority representation, and should not be seen as particular to the Shi'a case. Rather, it speaks to the way in which the production of the Shi'a subject is part of wider global processes and power structures that work to produce minority identities across contexts (Brubaker, 2002; Van Beek, 2000).

Another interesting element of the "Anti-Shi'ism" campaign (and one to which I have hinted above) is the construction of the term itself; it can hardly be a coincidence that the form of the word so closely mirrors that of Anti-Semitism, a term that is now widely accepted and used across the world. On the official website associated with the campaign, for example, the persecution of Shi'a Muslims is referred to as "another Holocaust", a claim that seeks to strategically harness the emotive power associated with the Holocaust and apply it to the case of Shi'a victimhood. In this sense, the discursive underpinnings of "Anti-Shi'ism" can be seen as seeking to address an assumed existing

[138] Perhaps the most prominent example of a self-styled radical Shi'a preacher is Yasser Habib, a London-based cleric who is well known for his firebrand views, including insulting the first two Islamic Caliphs Omar and Abu-Bakr, both of whom are revered by Sunnis, and for suggesting that Aisha, the Prophet's youngest wife, may have been responsible for his death.

international consensus regarding the rights of religious minorities, and to exploit the discursive power of Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust to promote the cause of "Shi'a Rights". Consider SRW's attempts to structure the terms of debate through the institutionalisation of the term "Anti-Shi'ism":

> **"Anti-Shi'ism" in Dictionaries**
>
> Shi'a Rights Watch, is proud to be the first to introduce "Anti-Shi'ism" as a new entry to dictionaries. Shi'a Rights Watch contacted a number of dictionaries in 2012 and asked them to add Anti-Shi'ism to their vocabulary lists. Recently Shi'a rights violations increased around the globe and it is very important that dictionaries offer the best word to define hate crimes and discrimination toward Shi'a Muslims. Urban, Merriam Webster and Collins dictionaries welcomed the new terminology.
>
> **SRW and Anti-Shi'ism**
>
> SRW insists that the term "Anti-Shi'ism" must be used in regards to crimes against Shi'a. The world is witnessing these heinous acts that are carried out in a prejudicial and systematic approach toward Shi'a through the world. The term "Anti-Shi'ism" and its derivations offer a realistic depiction of events and their impact, and recognise the persecution that targets Shi'a as a group, solely on the basis of their beliefs. These crimes are serious, unjust acts that threaten the lives and livelihood of Shi'a. These threats must be recognised and must be stopped immediately. [139]

The language here makes use of emotive and normatively-loaded terms such as "crimes", "heinous", "unjust", and "prejudicial" in order to foreground the ethical imperative to "be (a) good (Shi'a)". The injunction to codify and institutionalise the term "Anti-Shi'ism" is

[139] ibid

further leant symbolic weight through the appeal to the authority of (English-language) dictionaries such as Collins and Merriam Webster, while the call to action ("these crimes must be recognised and must be stopped immediately") is justified via recourse to an essentialised narrative of Shi'a victimhood and suffering. In this way, the introduction of the term "Anti-Shi'ism" seeks not only to define the terms of the debate, but also to shape the narrative within which that debate can take place in the first place; a narrative that presents Shi'a Islam as a monolithic entity that permanently and historically occupies the place of unworthy victim.

The term "Anti-Shi'ism" thus functions as part of the wider discourse of "Shi'a Rights" that is productive of a particular kind of Shi'a subject – one that is increasingly geared towards a transnational, trans-ethnic, ahistorical, and monolithic interpretation of what it means to be "Shi'a" that foregrounds a sense of victimhood as the foundation for Shi'a politico-religious emancipation. It is this Shi'a subject that is increasingly finding articulation within the diasporic imaginary, and which makes use of the language of international humanitarianism in order to produce an ethical imperative to "be Shi'a" understood as synonymous with the imperative to "be good".

Excavating the Diasporic Imaginary

While SRW might offer the best and most prominent example of the institutionalisation of the discourse of "Shi'a Rights", discourses, by their very nature, are not defined or contained by a single organisation but grow organically as part of the social Symbolic order (Glynos and Stavrakakis, 2008; Howarth and Torfing, 2005; Lacan, 2002). For this reason, it is important to consider how alternative iterations of this discourse – whether implicit or explicit – are being articulated across different contexts. As should be clear from above, it is my contention that the discourse of "Shi'a Rights" has come to function as a specific iteration of the Shi'a subject that emphasises the identity category of

"Shi'aness" over and above any differences in national, ethnic, or linguistic background among individuals. For Shi'a minorities in the UK and other Western countries, and especially for second- and third-generation diasporans, the increasing salience of the category "Shi'a" is thus able to fill the gap left by the absence of any strong attachment to the ethno-national culture of the alleged "homeland" (as explored in Chapters 1-3). Moreover, the diasporic encounter between Shi'a politico-religious mythology and practice and certain kinds of globalised liberal humanitarian norms have arguably produced a specific kind of Shi'a subject that is increasingly being articulated within the diasporic imaginary as a positive affirmation of Shi'a identity.

"Shi'a Rights" in Britain

In this section, I wish to return to the thesis' focus on the UK, and specifically to the ways in which the ethical Shi'a subject finds expression within the British domestic context. Although I in no way seek to claim that all Shi'a Muslims in Britain articulate versions of (or are even familiar with) the discourse of "Shi'a Rights", I am interested to explore the various manifestations of this discourse as and when I encountered them throughout my fieldwork. The most significant and evident examples of the way in which the discourse of "Shi'a Rights" has entered the diasporic imaginary is in the institutional framework of Shi'a-run organisations in the UK, and especially of the growth of organisations and campaigns geared specifically towards Shi'a Muslims as a distinct and separate minority community, such as Integrity, Who is Hussain?, AhlulBayt Islamic Mission (AIM), and university AhlulBayt Societies (ABSocs). Such organisations represent the increasing diversification of religious institutions within the UK context, in which different Islamic sects have created their own splinter organisations that cater specifically to their needs, rather than working across theological and community divides.[140]

[140] This is not to say that such organisations do not take participate in inter-faith activities, but such activism is more often than not geared towards overcoming divisions between different faith

To take one example, until relatively recently Muslim students at British universities were able to join and be involved in the activities of university Islamic societies (known as ISocs), which represented the diversity of Muslim theology and practice within each campus. Although most ISocs were dominated demographically by Sunni Muslims (since Sunnis make up the majority of Muslims within the UK and globally), and some had attracted a considerable amount of media criticism for their complicity in promoting a "radical" interpretation of Islam, ISocs were nominally the primary student body for representing and promoting the interests of all Muslim students (including Shi'is). In recent years, however, there has been a growth of university AhlulBayt societies (ABSocs) geared specifically towards (Twelver) Shi'a Muslims. Although such diversity, on the one hand, represents a positive affirmation of Shi'a religious and community identity, the often fraught relations between ABSocs and ISocs within the same university campus points, on the other, towards the increasing prioritisation of "Shi'aness" over and above any sense of "Muslimness" that might be shared with Sunni co-religionists. For example, throughout the academic year 2014-2015, the ABSoc of one London university I spent time researching, engaged in a self-proclaimed "boycott" of the university ISoc in order to protest the perceived "sectarianism" of the latter. In a Whatsapp conversation amongst ABSoc members in September 2014, three Shi'a undergraduates participated in the following exchange in relation to the boycott:

> **A:** So with all this that's happening with isoc [sic] and their committee are we welcome in isoc or will [we] be treated like 2nd class citizens?
>
> **J:** If you join absoc you are not allowed to join isoc
>
> **Q:** 2nd [class citizens]?? Ud be lucky [sic]

communities (most notably between Jews, Christians, and Muslims) than towards addressing theological and sociological divisions *within* Islam itself.

A: Loool [sic] Here's me thinking people were more tolerant at [University][141]

In the above exchange, humour is used as a way to mitigate the seriousness of the topic – the implicit accusation that the university ISoc is sectarian or anti-Shi'a. Interestingly, although accounts of why the split between the ISoc and ABSoc arose during this period varied considerably (some Shi'a students told me it was because the previous ISoc president had been forced out for wanting to collaborate with ABSoc, while others merely maintained that ISoc promoted "sectarian divisions"),[142] the most frequently recurring discursive trope was of Shi'a victimhood and minority representation. For example, take the exchange between two Shi'a students (both part of the university ABSoc committee) during the inaugural ABSoc meeting for the beginning of the 2014 academic year:

A: Why do we have two Islamic societies at [University]?

H: Because one's right and one's wrong.[143]

While humour is again used here to soften the message (the comment by H was accompanied by laughs from the other members), the promotion of two different Islamic societies, divided by sectarian affiliation, is suggestive of a crystallising sense of "Shi'aness" as a specific politico-religious identity category. The implicit assumption here, of course, being that it is the (Shi'a) ABSoc that is "right", and the (Sunni) ISoc that is "wrong" – thus invoking a sense of Shi'a-specific ethics predicated on an orientation towards religious difference.

[141] ABSoc Whatsapp conversation, 25 September 2014. Source: Author's fieldnotes.
[142] Author's fieldnotes, 25 September 2014.
[143] ibid.

Although the above examples point both to the increasing diversification of UK religious institutions and to the rise of a Shi'a-specific discursive identity construction (one that, I argue, is productive of the sectarianised Shi'a subject), there is also an important sense in which this orientation towards a Shi'a-specific subject is undergirded by a claim towards ethical self-betterment and humanitarianism. One such example is the Imam Hussain Blood Donation Campaign, which is a charitable project run by the UK-based Islamic Unity Society (IUS), a Shi'a-run charity affiliated to the Muslim Council of Britain, and backed by the NHS. According to the IUS website, the Imam Hussain Blood Donation Campaign is "the first campaign within the UK which aims to increase the number of regular blood donors from Muslim communities."[144] The website goes on to say:

> At the same time, the campaign seeks to increase awareness about Hussain, grandson of Prophet Muhammed (peace be upon them), and the tragedies he faced in Karbala when martyred for standing up against oppression and tyranny, and for justice and equality. Millions of people Worldwide [sic] are inspired by Hussain's great character and give blood as a way to help others in need and live up to these high values.[145]

Through the blood donation campaign, IUS thus aims to increase awareness about Shi'a Islam and the beliefs of Shi'a Muslims (most notably regarding the life and death of Imam Hussain). Here, the emphasis is very much on the inspiration of Hussain's story and the value that this story can imbue to others through the ethical imperative to give blood. In this way, the campaign replicated the logic of the discourse of "Shi'a Rights" through the appeal to ethical humanitarianism. Such positive articulations of "Shi'aness" thus form part of the discursive landscape within which a specifically *Shi'a* identity category can

[144] Source: https://ius.org.uk/giveblood, accessed 21 January 2017
[145] ibid

emerge, and is reflective of the way in which the globalised discourses of humanitarianism and human rights operate within the diasporic imaginary. In this sense, the increasing visibility of Shi'a Muslims as *Shi'a* first and foremost (whether manifested through the invocation of Shi'a victimhood or the ethical imperative to "be (a good) Shi'a") is part of a wider discursive and social architecture that undergirds the construction of the Shi'a subject. This subject, invested in the logic of ethical humanitarianism and oriented towards positive articulations of Shi'a activism and emancipation, nevertheless unconsciously (re)produces sectarianism in the way it works to prioritise Shi'a experiences and unproblematically construct "Shi'aness" as a transnational, trans-ethnic, and ahistorical politico-religious identity category. Moreover, the ethical imperative to "be Shi'a" is implicitly predicated on the contrary imperative to "*not*-be Sunni" in a discursive logic that articulates "Sunni-ness" as inherently antagonistic to "Shi'aness". In order to explore how this unconscious sectarianism works, it is necessary to excavate the ways in which the the ethical Shi'a subject functions ideologically within the diasporic imaginary to imagine (and desire) the identity category "Shi'a" as mutually exclusive to that of the identity category "Sunni". It is to this project that I now turn.

"Shi'a Rights" and the Sectarian Unconscious

> The unconscious is not, as is commonly held, some discrete, hidden domain of wild and unpredictable drives; rather, it is a linguistic site in which desire reveals itself. (Kapoor, 2014: 1123)

To speak of the unconscious of the discourse of "Shi'a Rights" is, necessarily, to also enquire into the libidinal attachments and affective investments cultivated by this discourse. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, it is not enough simply to identify the unconscious of any particular Symbolic order, but we are also required to understand how this order

comes both to sustain itself and to produce particular kinds of (politically-invested) subjects. Unlike the Freudian concept of the unconscious, which is understood as a facet of the individual psyche and therefore fundamentally *subjective* in origin, the Lacanian unconscious is intimately linked to the social-Symbolic order and thus fundamentally *collective* in its manifestations. This movement from the personal and subjective (Freud) to the social and inter-subjective (Lacan) is fundamental to the understanding of unconscious desire as implicated in processes of subject formation (Copeland, 2008; Dolan, 1995; Glynos, 2001; Howarth et al., 2000; Jameson, 1981; Kapoor, 2014; Lacan, 2004; Soler, 2014; Stavrakakis, 2002).[146] The unconscious, then, is not some hidden kernel of desire cultivated by the individual psyche, but rather an instance of discursive rupture that is reflective of Symbolic desire – i.e. of the desire produced as part of the Symbolic order and that is key to processes of subject formation (for without desire, there can be no subject).

I have already outlined the ways in which the discourse of "Shi'a Rights" is productive of a specific kind of sectarianised Shi'a subject – one that promotes Shi'a specificity at the same time as it is invested in secular liberal discourses of human rights and ethical humanitarianism. But there are two questions that remain if we are to understand the formation and functioning of this subject. Firstly, how is this subject positioned in the socio-Symbolic order such that it (re)produces sectarian dynamics; and secondly, what is the mechanism via which this subject works to shape the desire of individuals in ways that are productive of the sectarian unconscious? The first of these questions has already been partially answered in the preceding exploration of the encounter between Shi'a politico-religious ethics and international humanitarian norms, especially the implicit vilification of certain kinds of Sunni Islam; while the second of these questions will be

[146] The parameters of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, and especially the concepts of the Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real, have been previously discussed in depth in the Introduction.

addressed in the final section of this chapter through a Lacanian-inflected analysis of the way in which the ethical appeal to humanitarianism inherent in the discourse of "Shi'a Rights" functions as a form of ideological desire that works to bind individuals to the sectarianised Shi'a subject.

While the emergence of the discourse of "Shi'a Rights" is arguably a product of both the increasing globalisation of humanitarian norms and the diasporic encounter with secular liberalism, there is also an important sense in which this discourse is not only a *product* of the diasporic imaginary, but is actively invested in the cultivation of an international and (Western) non-Muslim audience towards which to direct its ethical claims (not to mention the younger generation of Western-born Shi'is to whom such discourses are both natural and familiar). In this sense, the emergence of the discourse of "Shi'a Rights" can be understood as a quintessentially modern phenomenon; only within the context of contemporary understandings of secular, liberal humanitarianism can the appeal to moral universalism inherent in the discourse of "Shi'a Rights" hold any emotive or affective weight; since the concept of "human rights" itself represents an example of the globalisation of Western liberal Enlightenment values as imposed on the rest of the world (c.f. Hopgood, 2013). Indeed, as Modood (2009) argues in relation to parallel forms of Sunni Muslim activism in Britain: "Muslim assertiveness… is primarily derived not from Islam or Islamism but from *contemporary Western ideas about equality*" (Modood, 2009: 202; emphasis added). Moreover, the fetishization of Shi'a victimhood as perpetrated by the Sunni Other – necessarily invoked through the construction of a ethical Shi'a subject predicated on emancipation and minority representation – replicates the discursive logic of the contemporary Western socio-Symbolic order, where certain interpretations of "radical" or "extremist" Sunni Islam have been constructed as the ultimate embodiment of (non-Western) "evil". In the words of Deeb (2011: 4), within contemporary social and political discourse, "various formations of 'political Islam' or

'Islamism' have come to represent the quintessential other, the antimodern antithesis to a supposedly secular West."[147]

In this way, the Shi'a subject constructed by the discourse of "Shi'a Rights" is simultaneously invested in the secular logic of liberal humanitarianism and minority representation at the same time as it (re)produces intra-communal antagonisms between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims by constructing both "Sunni-ness" and "Shi'aness" as essentialised identity categories locked in a logic of mutual exclusivity (as epitomised in the statement that "we're not *that* kind of Muslim"). The potential for sectarianism inherent in the discourse of "Shi'a Rights" is thus *unconscious*, since the primary purpose of the discourse is not to promote intra-communal antagonism but to articulate a positive and emancipatory ethical Shi'a subject with which individual practicing Shi'is can aspire to identify and which is widely intelligible to a global audience. Under this reading, my exploration of the unconscious of the "Shi'a Rights" discourse is less about individual Shi'is themselves than about the ways in which difference and otherness are marked and articulated within minority communities – especially when this difference is perceived to be under threat from a wider socio-political bloc (in this case, Sunni Islam) – and how the subjective attachments that come to be cultivated towards such defensive identities can themselves work to reproduce and reinforce such differences (Ahmed, 1995; Balibar, 2013; Branscombe et al., 1999; Castells, 2010; Hall, 2000, 2013; Modood and Werbner, 1997; Steflja, 2010; among others)

Humanitarianism, Ideology, and the Desiring Shi'a Subject

But if the Shi'a subject produced by the discourse of "Shi'a Rights" unconsciously works to (re)produce sectarianism, why does it continue to be articulated and performed in the

[147] Recall the discussion in Chapter 3 regarding the desire of Shi'is in Britain to qualitatively distinguish themselves from their Sunni co-religionists as a result of the pejorative discourses associated with Sunni Islam in the UK.

diasporic imaginary; in other words, what attaches the subject to particular iterations of "Shi'aness" and not to others? This is where a Lacanian understanding of fantasy and ideology prove useful in excavating the (socio-)subjective desire that works to bind the Shi'a subject to the sectarian unconscious of the discourse of "Shi'a Rights". In particular, it is my contention that the appeal to moral universalism undergirding the specific iteration of the sectarianised Shi'a subject through the discourse of "Shi'a Rights" functions as an ideological construction that works to obscure alternative articulations of this subject.

When it comes to the discourse of "Shi'a Rights", it should be immediately apparent that there are a number of terms that function as master signifiers that work to structure the content and function of this discourse. Terms such as "rights", "justice", "equality", "minority", "victim", "oppression", "persecution", even emotively-loaded terms such as "genocide" and "Holocaust" function primarily to "quilt" (Žižek, 1989) together iterations of "Shi'a Rights" within a wider discursive field of moral universalism and ethical humanitarianism. In this sense, the ultimate master signifier of the discourse of "Shi'a Rights" is the analogous discourse of "human rights" (c.f. Hopgood, 2013), and the ideological underpinnings of the "Shi'a Rights" discourse is arguably to present itself as part and parcel of a global and universal commitment to human rights (recall the motto of SRW: "Defending Justice and Rights"). In other words, the commitment to moral universalism and humanism functions as the *ideological core* of the discourse of "Shi'a Rights" at the same time as it represents the normative validation of this discourse in a language that is widely intelligible to non-Shi'is.

However, as outlined in the Introduction, the problem with this ideological commitment to ethical humanitarianism (or indeed any ideological formation) is that it is ultimately *lacking* (Lacan, 2003). Indeed, the discourse of "human rights" itself has been exposed

by numerous scholars to be an ideological construct that actually works as a "generalised mode of governing" (Fassin, 2009: 50) that (re)produces particularistic forms of identity formation under the guise of moral universalism (Chancock, 2000; Donnelly, 2007; Fassin, 2009, 2011, 2014; Hafner-burton et al., 2005; Hopgood, 2013; Ignatieff and Gutmann, 2003; Kapoor, 2013; Lettinga and van Troost, 2014; Macrae, 1998; Peterson, 1990; Solomon, 2000). As Van Beek argues:

> The contemporary prevalence of the politics of identity is not a sign of a new awakening of nations, this time in the guise of "ethnicity". Rather it is the product of two interrelated world historical processes: (perceived) dislocations due to the spread and deepening of capitalist relations, and the increasing reliance of practices of representation and democracy – in turn *rooted in a distributive conception of justice* – on the imputed stability and irreducibility of "identity" and the groupness it supposedly reflects. (Van Beek, 2000: 528–529; emphasis added)

In this sense, the ideological appeal to ethical humanitarianism at the heart of the discourse of "Shi'a Rights" functions as a *fantasy* – its claim to moral universalism seeking to obscure the orientation towards particularism that it entails. Without wishing to enter into a detailed critique of the discourse of human rights (c.f. Hopgood, 2013), it is my contention that the construction of the sectarianised Shi'a subject works in an analogous way, where the ideological conflation of "Shi'a Rights" with "human rights" is discursively constructed as an unproblematic normative "good". Within the discourse of "Shi'a Rights" (as in the discourse of "human rights"), the concepts of "justice", "equality", and "rights" are presented as one-dimensional; there is no acknowledgement of the complexities and nuances surrounding such terms – rather, they function as empty signifiers whose purpose is to designate the normative function of "good" within this

particular discursive order. In turn, it is this discursive construction of the "good" that undergirds the ethical imperative to "be (a good) Shi'a subject" implicated in the discourse of "Shi'a Rights". For this reason, the commitment to moral universalism can be understood as an ideological fantasy whose ultimate purpose is to shape the desire of the subject in a way that binds it to the existing ideological order. In particular, the Lacanian concept of *jouissance* can help illuminate the ways in which this fantasy functions to promote unconscious attachments to sectarianised iterations of the diasporic Shi'a subject.

When it comes to the (sectarianised) Shi'a subject, then, as structured by the discourse of "Shi'a Rights", the subject does not only reproduce the fantasy of moral universalism offered by this discourse, it positively derives enjoyment through the internalisation of this fantasy as a result of the ethical imperative to "be (a good) Shi'a" produced by this discourse. The discourse of "Shi'a Rights" thus functions as an ideological apparatus that conditions the Shi'a subject to *desire* Shi'a politico-religious emancipation and minority representation through the appeal to ethical humanitarianism. Nevertheless, as explored above, the forms this subject take are *necessarily* sectarian, since to work towards the construction of a Shi'a-specific identity category as a precursor to socio-political-religious emancipation and representation is to require the existence of a discursive other against which this identity category can be defined. In this sense, while the Shi'a subject *desires* to promote its own particularism through its commitment to international humanitarianism and moral universalism, the unconscious by-product of this positive articulation of Shi'a identity is the construction of a quintessentially non-Shi'a antagonistic Other (which, in the contemporary moment, is most often imagined as the "radical" or "extremist" forms of Sunni Islam).

Moreover, the very notion of bracketing-off and promoting particularistic and narrowly-defined identities according to singular categories (such as "ethnicity", "race", "sect", "religion") is arguably itself a product of the neoliberal capitalist order (Zizek, 2008), which requires the "recognition" of such distinct identities in order to regulate the segmentation of the global market (Fan, 2002; Navaro-Yashin et al., 2002; Shepherd, 2008). Since capitalism is primarily driven by the pursuit of profit, the market must continue to diversify – creating niches that are increasingly specific – in order to maintain a competitive edge. This is what is referred to as "market segmentation", which Reich, Gordon, and Edwards define as: "the historical process whereby political-economic forces encourage the division of the labour market into separate submarkets, or segments, distinguished by different labour market characteristics and behavioural rules" (Reich et al., 1973: 359).

Under this reading, the discourse of "Shi'a Rights" can thus be understood primarily as an ideological construction: one that seeks to discipline and shape the (sectarianised) Shi'a subject via affective attachment to the fantasy of moral universalism, and which is undergirded by a neo-capitalist incentive to promote difference as a function of the global marketplace. In this sense, the sectarianised unconscious of the "Shi'a Rights" discourse functions as a by-product of the subjective ideological commitment to moral universalism: only by promoting a (necessarily sectarianised) conception of a specifically *Shi'a* identity can the market niche be secured for the buying and selling of this identity through commodification.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the emerging phenomenon of what I have called the discourse of "Shi'a Rights" in order to expose the ways in which this discourse functions as an ideological construction that works to produce and sustain the sectarianised Shi'a

subject. Ultimately, I have argued that not only is the sectarianised unconscious a key element of this ideological formation, it is a necessary by-product of the process of articulating and defining a specifically "Shi'a" identity in the first place.

In this way, the argument of this chapter can be seen as complementing that of the previous three chapters, which were centrally preoccupied with tracing the shift from nationalist to ethno-religious and sectarian identifications within the diasporic imaginary – from the *Iraqi*-Shi'a subject, to the (Iraqi-)*Shi'a* subject, to the diasporic *Shi'a subject*, tout court. The focus of this chapter has thus been on the ways in which this emergent diasporic Shi'a subject, divorced from the ethno-cultural or national roots of the individuals who identify with it, has come to be articulated within the contemporary moment. In particular, it is my contention that the global hegemony of the discourses of international humanitarianism and human rights, coupled with an increasing orientation towards minority representation within the paradigm of (Western) secular liberalism, has led to the development of the discourse of "Shi'a Rights" where the category of "Shi'aness" is increasingly imagined as a minority identity worthy of international representation.

Moreover, the ethical underpinnings of the discourse of "Shi'a Rights", which is predicated on particular understandings of what it means to "be (a) good (Shi'a)" is central to the enduring attachment of the Shi'a subject to particular ways of being "Shi'a" and performing "Shi'aness". Specifically, the moral universalism undergirding the discourse of "Shi'a Rights" functions as a ideological fantasy (in the Lacanian sense) that works to bind the subject to the unconscious (re)production of sectarianism at the same time as it obscures this sectarianism by cultivating a desire for the bracketing-off of "Shi'aness" as a minority identity worthy of recognition and representation in its own right. In this sense, while the ethical Shi'a subject produced by the discourse of "Shi'a

Rights" is heavily invested in notions of equality, justice, liberalism, and human rights, the cultivation of a Shi'a-specific identity through which to claim access to such "Shi'a Rights" is *inevitably* sectarian as it requires the existence of a discursive (non-Shi'a, Sunni) Other against which to define itself. Moreover, this fragmentation of identity categories into ever smaller subjective units should be understood not as a product of some kind of primordial or essentialised Shi'a-Sunni antagonism, but – at least partially – as a logical outcome of the workings of contemporary consumer capitalism whereby the segmentation of the market forms an integral part of the diversification of minority identities.

In the final chapter, I turn to these processes of commodification in order to show how the sectarianisation of the Shi'a subject has produced a number of material practices that together work to inscribe this subject within the neo-liberal capitalist order. Taken together, Chapters 4 and 5 showcase the way in which the sectarianised Shi'a subject is both ideologically and materially invested in the maintenance of particular contemporary power structures, and how the discourse of "Shi'a Rights" works to (partially) obscure the workings of such structures through recourse to the fantasy of moral universalism and the ethical imperative to "be (a) good (Shi'a)".

Chapter 5 – Hijabs, Hoodies, and Hashtags: Commodifying the Shi'a Subject

Introduction

In this final chapter, I continue my preoccupation with contemporary articulations of the (sectarianised) Shi'a subject by excavating the ways in which this subject has been permeated by the logic of neoliberal capitalism and inscribed into the global economy through practices of commodification and fetishisation. In particular, I am interested in exploring the discursive construction and symbolic resonance of the identity category "Shi'a" as it has come to be represented within the international marketplace through the proliferation of what I call "Shi'a objects". It is my contention that the symbolic construction of "Shi'aness" as an ethno-religious identity category in its own right has been facilitated by the logic of consumer capitalism whereby the production of minority identities is bound up with the workings of the market and the creation of identity-consumers (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009). In particular, the way in which consumer capitalism functions through "an ever more specialised targeting of consumers" (Yudice, 1995: 5), where individuals are sold an ever diverse range of "consumable styles" (ibid) in which ethnic, cultural, and religious identities are "packaged up to be assumed in commodity form" (Navaro-Yashin, 2001: 223). In this sense, the sectarianised Shi'a subject can come to be understood as a product of contemporary forces of power, globalisation, capitalism, and consumerism in a manner that replicates other kinds of group-based identity formations; as much as it is simultaneously a movement towards minority representation and emancipation and a product of symbolic and material violence against Shi'is around the world.

While the previous chapter focused on the rise of a particularistic Shi'a identity discourse predicated on the principles of distributive justice, equality, and human rights, this final chapter seeks to explore the ways in which this emergent Shi'a identity has both been commodified in order to be inscribed into the global marketplace, and is itself indicative of the pervasive power of capital and hegemony in producing and sustaining specific forms of identity constructions through the increasing segmentation of the market. For this reason, the focus of this chapter is on the material and symbolic goods and objects that have come to be traded and exchanged in relation to ways of being Shi'a and of performing Shi'ism, and the way in which practicing Shi'is have consciously and unconsciously "bought in" to the Shi'a subject represented by these commodities. The commodification of Shi'a goods and services is part of a global shift towards the fetishisation of identities, in which the concept of a Shi'a-specific identity has become naturalised in a way that ultimately masks the ways in which this identity is itself "a product of modernity, itself inextricably connected with the rise, spread, and deepening of capitalism and the international states system" (Van Beek, 2000: 528).

The chapter will begin with a brief exploration of the concepts of commodification and identity fetishism, in order to lay the groundwork for understanding how these processes are at work in contemporary iterations and performances the sectarianised Shi'a subject. Part of this project will involve detailing how the construction of minority identity categories through the inscription of material objects necessarily involves the delineation of in- and out-group boundaries, and is therefore implicated in the politics of sectarianism when it comes to the production of the Shi'a subject. While much of my empirical material is undergirded by a Marxist understanding of commodity fetishism (Marx, 2010), for the purposes of this thesis I am more interested in the ways in which material objects contribute to the *symbolic* construction of the social world, and in particular of social groups – akin to Bourdieu's notion of "symbolic capital" (Bourdieu,

1979, 1984, 1985, 1989). By focusing on the symbolic construction of "Shi'aness" through the inscription and proliferation of "Shi'a objects", I am thus able to foreground my preoccupation with the (discursively constructed) Shi'a subject and avoid the potential essentialist trap of reducing individuals to their particular and contextual iterations of that subject.

Having thus laid the theoretical groundwork informing my approach here, I turn to the empirical material garnered from my fieldwork in order to outline how the commodification and fetishisation of "Shi'aness" is contributing to specific iterations of the Shi'a subject within the global marketplace. Within the chapter, this empirical material is divided thematically into two sections. The first section deals primarily with the proliferation of what I call "Shi'a objects" – the material commodities that are being bought and sold on the marketplace and that have become inscribed with some symbolic sense of "Shi'a identity", whether through their religious and theological value or through the cultivation of an ethno-cultural notion of "Shi'aness". In this way, I am able to trace the emergence of the market for "Shi'a objects" and assess the extent to which the commodification of "Shi'aness" through the proliferation of such objects is productive of the sectarianised Shi'a subject under investigation.

The second empirical section, and final part of the chapter, turns instead to the symbolic construction of "Shi'ism" within the virtual – rather than material – world. Specifically, I am interested in documenting the ways in which the Internet and social media are being used as platforms by practicing Shi'is in order to promote particular ways of being and doing "Shi'aness" that is reflective of the wider discursive shift towards the sectarianised Shi'a subject I have been tracing throughout this thesis. In particular, it is my contention that the diasporic experience has been a significant contributing factor to both the emergence and spread of a transnational, trans-ethnic, Shi'a-specific identity category

that has, in turn, found expression within the virtual arena. For this reason, the types of "Shi'aness" articulated on social media and the Internet more broadly should be understood as key constitutive factors in the construction of the contemporary Shi'a subject – as part of a wider discursive field of power and capital and not as subjective expressions of individual identity.

Ultimately, this chapter should be seen as a complement to Chapter 4. Whereas the argument of the previous chapter focused on the inscription of the Shi'a subject into contemporary discursive power structures through the emergence of the discourse of "Shi'a Rights", this final chapter seeks to explore the ways in which this subject is equally implicated in the logic of contemporary neo-capitalism. In this way, chapters 4 and 5 document the extent to which the (sectarianised) Shi'a subject should be understood as a thoroughly *modern* subject; a product of the contemporary world and not a "throwback" to an underlying sectarian "essence". The way in which this subject has been inscribed within the global marketplace through the processes of commodification and fetishisation is thus a testament to both the relevance and resonance of this subject within the contemporary moment.

Shi'ism, Inc.

> While it is increasingly the stuff of existential passion, of the self-conscious fashioning of meaningful, morally-anchored selfhood, ethnicity is *also* becoming more corporate, more commodified, more implicated than ever before in the economics of everyday life. (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009: 1)

As the above quote exemplifies, there is a paradox inherent in any discussion of the contemporary articulation of ethnic, religious, or racial identities. On the one hand, such

articulations are increasingly framed as the expression of an "authentic" selfhood, often framed through recourse to the "coming-out" discourse associated with the public and visible display of identity (Gagné et al., 1997; Rust, 1993; Samuels, 2003; Seif, 2014). This conception often amounts to a contemporary form of essentialism, whereby such identity articulations are seen as stemming from some kind of natural or underlying ethno-religio-cultural-racial "essence" that, in turn, comes to define the "identity" of the individual or group in question (Brubaker, 2002, 2014; Comaroff, 1996; Jenkins, 2014). On the other hand, these identity categories are also increasingly bound up with the workings of the global marketplace such that the boundaries between different categories are becoming ever more rigidly defined through the creation of ethno-specific market segments (Brekke, 2016; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009; Žižek, 2005). In this way, ethnic, religious, and racial identities are simultaneously being constructed as natural elements of the social world at the same time as they are being understood as products of consumer capitalism and neoliberal economic governmentality.

At the individual level, this paradox effectively means that individuals are forced to identify with such distinct and concrete ethno-cultural-religious identity categories while also acknowledging that doing so implicates them in the contemporary hegemony of neoliberal capitalism. Here, I am less interested in exploring how individuals might negotiate this bind than in understanding the ways in which such identity categories come to be constructed and inscribed within the global market in the first place. The primary question underlying the focus of this chapter, in other words, is *what* is the diasporic Shi'a subject and *how* is it being produced and articulated through processes of commodification and identity fetishism? The emergence of a Shi'a-specific identity category within the diasporic context, I maintain, is deeply implicated in the contemporary workings of consumer capitalism and, in turn, comes to shape the kinds of identifications that individuals are able to make via particular acts of consumption.

The diasporic Shi'a subject is thus a significant factor in the shaping of the symbolic and discursive world via which individuals are able to make sense of their own "Shi'a identity".

Commodifying Identity: Between Fetishism and Symbolic Capital

The link between identity and commodification is one that has been oft-explored in the literature, most notably in works that make use of Marx's conception of commodity capitalism and fetishism (Appadurai, 1986, 1994; Billig, 1999; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009; Navaro-Yashin et al., 2002; Pinto, 2007; among others). Indeed, it has become something of a tautology to assert that within the parameters of neoliberal consumer capitalism, the acquisition of material goods is often intrinsic to the act of asserting a particular political, cultural, or social identity; in the words of Billing (1999: 317), "to have is to be." But what exactly is a commodity, and how does it work to construct and constrain the subjective identifications available to individuals? Perhaps the best definition is given by Marx himself, who states that:

> A commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another. (Marx, quoted in Appadurai, 1994: 79)

In other words, a commodity is a material thing (produced through the mechanisms of labour and exchange) that provokes some kind of desire in human beings, usually through the illusion of satisfying that desire. For Marx, the value of the commodity is not intrinsic to the object itself, but a result of the labour that has gone into producing it; however, the fact that the commodity comes to be valued *extrinsically* – for what it can *do* (i.e. represent the contours of a particular kind of identity) not what it *is* – ultimately serves to mask the labour that has gone into producing the commodity in the first place

and thus gives the illusion of intrinsic value. This is what Marx intends by the term "commodity fetishism": where the commodity itself comes to stand in for the value of the labour that produced it; and where the labour of the production becomes obscured by the assumed value of the commodity by virtue of its ability to provoke and satisfy desire. Within the capitalist system, it is commodities that are bought, sold, and traded on the global market, not the labour that goes into their production – this is the ultimate "dissembling or duplicity [that is] built into the very economic structures of capitalism" (Eagleton, 2014: 86).

From this brief foray into Marxist theory, it should be clear that consumer capitalism functions primarily as a way to channel and mould human desire (as represented by the commodity) in the pursuit of profit, which itself can work to produce both individual and collective identities as an effect of that desire. In this sense, it is possible to see a theoretical bridge between Marxist and Lacanian thought, where the role and function of *desire* becomes central to the question of identity and identification. It is precisely because of the link between commodity fetishism and desire, as established by Marx, that it is possible to offer an exploration of particular form of identity (and the subjective attachments they produce) via an analysis of the material and symbolic objects cultivated by individuals in pursuit of such identities. In other words, a focus on the material objects (manifested as commodities) associated with particular ways of "being Shi'a" can, in turn, shed light on the type of Shi'a subject such commodities work to both produce and sustain. From a Lacanian perspective, a focus on commodities can also help illuminate the kinds of subjective fantasies that have become inscribed into the global market for identities, an especially on the fetishisation of minority ethic, religious, and cultural identities.

While a Marxist lens can help shed light on the link between capitalism, identity, and desire, the material focus of much of Marxist thought can also obscure the extent to which the construction of identity is equally deeply inscribed within symbolic, as well as material, representation. This is where the work of Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1979, 1984, 1985, 1989, 1991) proves useful in drawing out the link between identity, capitalism, and representation. In particular, Bourdieu emphasises the extent to which material objects (i.e. commodities) are often instrumentalised by individuals and groups as a way of displaying their identification with specific ethno-cultural-religious categories:

> But on a deeper level, the quest for the "objective" criteria of "regional" or "ethnic" identity should not make one forget that, in social practice, these criteria (for example, language, dialect, and accent) are the objects of *mental representation*, that is, of acts of perception and appreciation, of cognition and recognition, in which agents invest their interests and their presuppositions, and *of objective representations*, in things (emblems, flags, badges, etc.) or acts, self-interested strategies of symbolic manipulation which aim at determining the (mental) representation that other people may form of these properties and their bearers. (Bourdieu, 1991: 220; original emphasis)

In this sense, the value of material objects within commodity capitalism is not limited to the labour of their production or the fetishisation of the object through rendering this labour invisible, it is also a product of the inscription of such objects within a wider socio-symbolic field whereby the object itself comes to both symbolise and stand in for the "identity" it purports to represent. This is especially pertinent when it comes to group-based identity categories, such as those predicated on ethnic, racial, cultural, or religious boundaries. As Bourdieu further argues:

> Struggles over ethnic or regional identity… are a particular case of the different struggles over classifications, struggles over the monopoly of the power to make people see and believe, to get them to know and recognise, to impose the legitimate definition of the social world and, thereby, to *make and unmake groups*. What is at stake here is the power of imposing a vision of the social world through principles of division which, when they are imposed on a whole group, establish meaning and a consensus about meaning, and in particular about the identity and unity of the group, which creates the reality of the unity and identity of the group. (Bourdieu, 1991: 221)

The social value that is inscribed onto objects and commodities within a wider discursive system of representation is what Bourdieu terms "symbolic capital", which works to "bring into existence what it asserts" – i.e. specific identity categories – through the mechanism of recognition (Bourdieu, 1991: 221). In other words, ethnic, cultural, and religious objects do not exist in a vacuum, but are embedded in a web of social meaning-making which renders them "recognisable" and thus intelligible as expressions of individual or collective "identity". Moreover, while individuals may play an active role in choosing the types of objects to consume and display in order to signal their "identity", the contours of this identity are a product of the social world, and not of individual agency. As Tilley makes clear: "Although material culture may be produced by individuals, it is always a *social* production" (2003: 70; emphasis added). In this way, objects and commodities produced, used, displayed, and coveted by practicing Shi'is are simultaneously constructed and understood as "Shi'a objects" both by Shi'is and non-Shi'is and are inscribed in a wider socially-constructed social field denoting "Shi'aness". Such objects work to construct the social and discursive boundary of what it means to

be “Shi’a” and work to police the boundaries of the Shi’a subject in a way that is socially intelligible.

Adopting an understanding of capitalism and commodification that takes inspiration from Bourdieu, rather than adhering to the strict structuralism of Marx, thus precipitates a focus on the ways in which both material and virtual objects come to be invested with social meaning – and thus be inscribed into the global marketplace through the workings of symbolic capital – rather than on the manufacture or circulation of these objects in and of themselves as products of labour. Moreover, the processes of differentiation, intelligibility, and recognition involved in the production of such symbolic objects is necessarily *political*, since it involves the delineation of in- and out-group boundaries. As Bourdieu (1991: 249)states: “Politics is the site *par excellence* of symbolic effectiveness, an activity which works through signs capable of producing social entities and, above all, groups”. The commodification of Shi’a objects should thus be understood as part and parcel of the socio-symbolic discursive construction of the Shi’a subject, and not as a material process that stands outside the boundaries of social reality. It is to the wider socio-political implications of such commodification that I now turn.

Essentialising “Shi’aness” on the Global Market

The production, dispersal, and commodification of Shi’a objects – whether they be ritual objects of prayer, fashion items or accessories, or mediated affirmations of “Shi’aness” for external consumption – has contributed to the fetishisation and essentialisation of Shi’a identity by defining the terms by which this very identity can be expressed or articulated by individuals; in other words, to define the contours of the Shi’a subject. The accumulation of Shi’a objects works to inscribe “Shi’aness” within a neo-capitalist system of consumption and corporatisation; but such branding can only function within a discursive system in which the contours of Shi’a identity have already been pre-

determined. In other words, the marketing and selling of Shi'a objects can only be successful when these objects are seen to stand in for the very identity they purport to represent – hence allowing individuals to "buy into" assertions of "Shi'aness" through acts of conspicuous consumption – which requires a prior understanding of the discursive content of the identity category "Shi'a". As Chancock affirms, "cultures, like brands, must essentialise… successful and sustainable cultures are those which brand best" (Chancock, 2000: 24–26).

Indeed, it is precisely through the essentialisation of ethno-cultural identity categories that neoliberal capitalism is able to carve up the diversity of the global market into profitable market segments. For this reason, in order for Shi'a identity to be successfully "bought" and "sold" through the exchange of commodities, this identity has to primarily function as an essentialised category; one that is recognisable across different spatial and temporal contexts. Moreover, it is my contention that the essentialism inherent in the corporatisation of a Shi'a-specific identity category has been a significant contributing factor in the sectarianisation of this identity. Asserting a Shi'a identity is primarily about asserting difference, about defining the boundaries of in- and out-group in mutually comprehensible ways. As Comaroff and Comaroff outline:

> Those who seek to brand their otherness, to profit from what makes them different, find themselves having to do so in the universally recognisable terms in which difference is represented, merchandised, rendered negotiable by means of the abstract instruments of the market: money, the commodity, commensuration, the calculus of supply and demand, price, branding, And advertising. (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009: 24)

If the notion of a recognisable Shi'a identity necessarily requires an essentialised understanding of Shi'ism as a ethno-religious category of belonging, then it is my contention that the manifestations through which this identity category finds expression work to replicate and flatten the complex history of Shi'ism and the diverse cultures and backgrounds of individual Shi'is into easily recognisable visual and discursive tropes. In other words, the commodification of the identity category of "Shi'aness" has, arguably, contributed to the sectarianisation of the Shi'a subject through processes of essentialism and differentiation. Within the global market represented by the diaspora, "Shi'ianess" thus functions as a category of otherness and difference that draws on socially embedded tropes regarding the status and place of minorities, as well as on the mythologies and practices of Shi'ism itself. This is why it makes sense for my research participants to assert that they are "British Shi'a", or that they have "more in common" with a Shi'a Muslim from a different ethno-national background than with a Sunni or non-Muslim Iraqi.[148] Shi'ism (at least in the diasporic context), has thus come to be defined as a pseudo-ethnic minority identity, articulated in relation to the *marja'iyya* and the Ahlulbayt, and performed through the enactment of religious rituals and mythologies associated with Muharram, pilgrimage, and expressions of Shi'a suffering and persecution. Each of these facets, in turn, has come to be objectified and commodified through the market for Shi'a objects.

Indeed, there is an extent to which individual Shi'is are aware of the objectification of Shi'a identity, and cultivate a reflexivity regarding the kinds of objects and commodities they choose to display to the world. For example, during an ABSoc meeting at a London university in October 2014, M, a young Iraqi Shi'i, proposed that members of the society

[148] This trend towards the ethnicisation of Shi'ism as a category of belonging, especially in multicultural diasporic contexts where a shared Shi'a identity is often used as a way to create commonalities between diverse ethno-national groups, was recently highlighted during a conference on "Shi'a Minorities in the Contemporary World" held at the University of Chester on 20 May 2016.

should "bring a personal item that is linked to your Shi'a identity to be worn… at the UGM [University General Meeting]" (Author fieldnotes, 9 October 2014). Here, M is not only demonstrating an awareness that certain commodified belongings serve to mark individuals out as having a "Shi'a identity" (i.e. that such objects are inscribed with symbolic capital that renders them "Shi'a"), he is also encouraging others to visibly and publically display this sectarian ethno-religious identity as a form of self-determination and minority representation within the university campus. Such assertions of "Shi'a identity" only make sense if articulated within recognisable visual and discursive socio-symbolic tropes, such as the wearing of black and green, reference to the Ahl al-Bayt, and enacting Shi'a religious rituals. Within the context of diasporic spaces such as multicultural London, where Shi'is from different socio-economic, ethnic, and national backgrounds come together to articulate a common sense of "Shi'aness", any notion of Shi'a identity must first be reduced to its bare essence in order for it to be comprehensible and recognisable for the largest number of individuals. It is this streamlining and essentialisation of Shi'a identity along (ethno-)religious (rather than cultural or national) lines that has allowed for the emergence and growth of a global "Shi'a industry" (Spellman-Poots, forthcoming 2017).

The streamlining of Shi'a identity into a recognisable semiotic system of signs and objects, while certainly not a new phenomenon, is thus reflective of wider global trends regarding the branding and corporatisation of religious and ethnic identity categories. As Brekke notes in the aptly titled *Faithonomics*: "There are markets for religious ideas, goods, and services… Many of the services offered by religious organisations and the people working in them can be analysed in the same way as products that are sold and bought in markets for goods and services" (Brekke, 2016: 21). In this sense, it is possible to understand the commodification of Shi'a objects as part of a global market for "Shi'a identity" that cross-sects a diverse arena of goods and services.

Identity Beyond Commodification

While the above discussion has illustrated the ways in which neoliberal capitalism and the global marketplace have contributed to the emergence of a sectarianised Shi'a-specific identity category predicated on minority representation and difference, I do not wish to imply that this is a closed system within which the outcome has already been predetermined by the logic of capital and exchange. Rather, I would like to suggest that the production of the Shi'a subject is an open-ended and ongoing process, whose outcome is constantly under negotiation as a result of the multiple and fluid ways in which individuals can come to identify with this subject. As Comaroff and Comaroff remark:

> Mass inculcation reaffirms ethnicity – in general and in all its particularity – and, with it, the status of the embodied ethnic subject as a source and means of identity. (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009: 20)

In other words, while it is impossible to reverse the inscription of "Shi'a identity" into the global marketplace, the ways in which this identity come to be defined and articulated depend, in part, on the affective and symbolic value attributed to the concept of "Shi'aness" in the first place. Indeed, when individuals choose to buy and display Shi'a objects, or undertake pilgrimage trips to the shrine cities of Iraq and Iran, they are not simply thoughtless consumers of Shi'a commodities, but active interpreters of the symbolic and emotional meanings these commodities represent. In this way, the Shi'a subject is constantly being (re)produced, (re)imagined, and (re)interpreted by the social and material practices of individual practicing Shi'is who come to identify with it. The link between subjective (re)iterations of the Shi'a subject and this subject's socio-symbolic construction are thus not eliminated by the inscription of "Shi'aness" into the global marketplace. Indeed, as Comaroff and Comaroff (2009) go on to state, the processes of

commodification and objectification necessary to such market forces may actually *enhance* the subjective attachments of individuals to this subject:

> The process of cultural commodification, and the incorporation of identity in which it is imbricated, is less linear, less teleological, more capricious than either classical economics or critical theory might suggest. Neither for consumers not for producers does the *aura* of ethno-commodities simply disappear with their entry to the market; sometimes… it may be rediscovered, reanimated, regained. (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009: 20, emphasis added)

From a Lacanian perspective, the "aura" of Shi'a commodities does not derive solely from the symbolic and affective values attributed to them by individuals, but also from the ideological fantasy that undergirds their consumption. As outlined above, under a Marxist reading, commodities are objects that produce *desire* in the individual; in Lacanian terms, this desire is the desire of the lacking subject to achieve full identification within the Symbolic order. In other words, the reason why commodities retain their "aura" despite their inscription into the capitalist order is because they represent the potential for the subject to fulfil its desire for a coherent Symbolic identity. Yet this is a potential that can never be fulfilled, since the subject is always-already alienated within the Symbolic order (Friedlander and Malone, 2000; Lacan, 2002, 2004; Žižek, 1989). It is this lack at the heart of the Shi'a subject (itself a discursive construction) that requires individuals to constantly assert their identification with that subject through material practices of consumption and commodification.

In other words, the notion of a coherent and unified "Shi'a identity" is itself an ideological fantasy undergirded by the neoliberal capitalist order that precipitates a need for individuals to identify with a fluid and shifting Shi'a subject. While this subject is currently

articulated as sectarianised and differentiated, it is also subject to interpretation and change. As a product of diverse discursive, political, economic, and social factors, the Shi'a subject acts as a distorted reflection of the contemporary world, and of the various manifestations of power within that world.

Having thus outlined the theoretical preoccupations informing the discussion of the Shi'a subject within this chapter, I now wish to turn to the empirical material garnered during my fieldwork that exemplifies the way in which this subject is becoming increasingly commodified and fetishised in order to understand the relationship between the socio-symbolic production of the Shi'a subject and its inscription within the wider global neoliberal marketplace.

"Brand Shi'a": Fetishism and Religious Objectification

> On the day we were to learn our prayers [at school], I happened to arrive early. There was only one other person in the classroom, and my heart sped up when I saw him. Mohammed, the smartest boy in class, was standing on the other side of the room by the windows… I had a crush on Mohammed, but had never been bold enough to talk to him. As I nervously put my books on my desk, we talked about our homework and I showed him how we pray, holding my hands to my side as my mother had taught me the night before. He screwed up his face and stared at me as if he had just seen something repulsive. "Oooh," he said. "You're *Shi'a.*" (Salbi, 2005: 14–15)

Perhaps one of the most common affirmations I encountered when speaking to first-generation Iraqis in the UK about identity politics and sectarianism in Iraq pre-2003 is the claim that notions of "Sunni" and "Shi'a" held almost no resonance within (educated)

Iraqi society, and that most people barely knew who belonged to which sect. Often the only indication of someone's sectarian background would emerge in the subtle differences in which Sunnis and Shi'is pray or do their ablutions (as in the above excerpt from Zainab Salbi's memoir about growing up in Iraq during the late 70s/early 80s).

This narrative of a golden asectarian past is part and parcel of the rose-tinted nostalgia often iterated by first-generation diasporans, and glosses over much of the structural sectarianism and marginalisation faced by Shi'a communities under the Ba'th regime, especially in the South of the country. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which sect in pre-2003 Iraq was less outwardly visible and less immediately marked than it has come to be in the diaspora today. While sect in Iraq may have once been a matter of when and how one prayed, for many contemporary Iraqis in the diaspora sect has become a tangible and everyday part of the identity they project to the world. Indeed, just as other categories of identification have come to be associated with certain visual tropes and patterns of commodity consumption, so too has a certain way of being visibly and distinguishably "Shi'a" come to be displayed on the streets and in the shop fronts of cities such as London.

While Shi'is in Iraq, under the threat of communitarian violence, have become increasingly adept at dissimulating and hiding their sectarian origins – whether by carrying multiple identity cards with different names, adapting their speech and accent styles, or changing their forms of dress (Haddad, 2014) – Iraqi Shi'is in the diaspora, free from such threats or obligations, have been increasingly free to express their religion and/or sect in any way they see fit. Moreover, as a minority religious group Shi'a Muslims in the UK have arguably sought to find ways to differentiate themselves from the wider (and predominantly Sunni) British Muslim population. Under such circumstances, it is hardly surprising that distinctive ways of dress and custom (often stemming from

different places of origin) have become crystallised in the diasporic space; with similar trends being observed across a variety of different diasporic religious and cultural communities (Alfonso et al., 2004; Anthias, 2008; Hall, 2013; Mandaville and Lyons, 2012; among others).

For example, I recall a Sunni friend of mine remarking on what she called the "Shi'a way" of wearing the *hijab* (Islamic headscarf), which she described as covering the tip of the wearer's chin,[149] as well as the prevalence of the colour black: "If you see someone wearing all black and crying, you just know they're Shi'a."[150] While the final comment may also be a pejorative reference to certain Shi'a rituals of mourning and commemoration during Muharram, it clearly indicates the existence of visible signs of difference between Sunni and Shi'a communities within the UK context in ways that serve to mark individuals as subjects of a sectarian discursive social logic.

This accumulation of physical and semiotic signs (often a combination of dress, speech, name, ethnic or cultural origin, demeanour, etc.) is reminiscent of what Burton, in the context of Northern Ireland, dubs "telling": "a system of signs by which religion [and sectarian] ascription is arrived at in practical settings" (Burton, 1979: 62). In this sense, dressing, speaking, or acting in a certain way can be sufficient to "mark" an individual as either "Sunni" or "Shi'a" within a sectarian logic of mutual exclusivity (as in the quip marking the wearing of black and shedding of tears as specifically "Shi'a" traits). While some signifiers may stem from inherent differences between Shi'ism and other branches

[149] This style of hijab is closely associated with the Iranian Revolution, and is most often worn by very devout or orthodox (often older) Shi'a women, especially those who support Khomeini or the doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih*; the younger generation tend to be more flexible and creative in the ways they wear the hijab, just as in Sunni communities. It should be noted that this unidimensional view of Shi'ism within certain parts of the Sunni community is reflected in some Shi'a circles through similar restrictive and non-nuanced visions of Sunnism (for example, that all Sunnis are Wahhabis or support ISIS); together, the prevalence of such stereotyping and typecasting no doubt contributes to the ongoing divisive and sectarian discourse between the two communities.

[150] Informal conversation with YH, 12 January 2015.

of Islam (such as the Shi'a style of praying with the hands by the sides, as illustrated in the Salbi quote), others form part of a wider socio-symbolic system of meaning that works to construct mutually-intelligible categories of "Shi'aness" through the inscription of material objects and commodities – whether that be the consumption and display of specific "Shi'a objects", or specific patterns of behaviour that work to mark individuals as "Shi'a" and simultaneously define the boundaries of the Shi'a subject being articulated.

Shi'a Objects: Between Piety and Minority Representation

At the present moment, there is a wide variety of objects and commodities that work to mark individuals within the diaspora as belonging to the specific religious and sectarian community of "Shi'ism". These can vary from religious objects – such as symbols associated with the Ahl al-Bayt, sacred memorabilia and objects of prayer – to specific forms of dress and style – such as the wearing of black and green, Iranian-style chadors, and garments associated with the mourning rituals of Muharram. While many of these symbols have historically been associated with the beliefs and practices of Shi'is, they have come to take on a new significance in the diasporic context of multicultural London where Shi'is of different ethnic and national backgrounds have increasingly come together under the mutually-constructed identity category of "Shi'aness".

The consumption and display of such Shi'a objects within the diasporic context contributes to shaping the discursive contours of the diasporic Shi'a subject while simultaneously signifying that subject as invested both in forms of religious piety and in concepts of minority representation. To be recognisably and intelligibly "Shi'a" in multicultural London requires the differentiation of Shi'a objects both from secular or non-religious objects and from "Muslim" objects more broadly. In this sense, the marking of "Shi'a identity" though objectification in the diasporic context necessarily involves the projection of a particularistic and religiously-inflected iteration of "Shi'aness" in order to

distinguish this particular identity category from other kinds of religious or community belonging. Moreover, as discussed earlier in the thesis, the social and political context of multicultural Britain has created a discursive field in which the assertion of difference is increasingly seen as an a claim towards minority identity and representation. For individual practicing Shi'is, the kinds of subjective identifications available within such a discursive hegemony are thus necessarily geared towards the assertion of a Shi'a-specific minority identity predicated on difference and religiosity that works to produce the sectarianised Shi'a subject within the diasporic imaginary.

One example of the use of ritual objects to proscribe and project a particular and religiously-inscribed articulation of Shi'a identity is an unofficial campaign I witnessed by a university ABSoc to have a collection of *turbas*[151] permanently installed in the multi-faith prayer room on campus. The idea was first floated at one of the society meetings in October 2014, with people citing the impracticality of having to carry their own *turbas* with them and arguing for the need to have Shi'ism "represented" on campus. However, there was also a considerable amount of scepticism and resistance, as people remarked on previous negative experiences of having similar religious items "desecrated". As one young man affirmed:

> For someone who has had his [*turbas*] deliberately stepped on,[152] not to mention had posters ripped up and left-handed handshakes, I for one suggest you don't leave any *turbas* unaccompanied in the male prayer room, as I would rather it not be desecrated. (Author fieldnotes, 8 October 2014)

[151] A *turba* (pl. *turab* – though here I am using the Anglicised plural *turbas* as this is reflective of the usage by the majority of my research participants) is a small piece of baked earth or clay (those made of the earth of Karbala being the most sacred) used by Shi'a Muslims during prayer. The *turba* represents something clean and natural, and can be substituted in most Shi'a schools by a piece of paper or other natural material.
[152] For a *turba* to be stepped on constitutes an act of desecration because it is considered a sacred object by some Shi'a (though this itself is disputed among different Shi'a schools).

Eventually, it was decided that a small number of plain,[153] non-Karbala *turbas* would be placed in the male prayer room and monitored. One person even shared a picture of the *turbas* on the society's Whatsapp group to show that they had been successfully installed. However, at the following meeting, the topic surfaced again as it was revealed that of the original five *turbas* that had been placed in the prayer room, only three remained; the implication being that they had been intentionally taken as an act of sabotage by what one person called "Wahhabis" and "anti-Shi'a" members of the university Islamic society. The next day, an ABSoc member posted a picture on the society's Whatsapp group showing the following note they had written and placed in the men's prayer room:

> We kindly request that you stop *stealing* the Turbah [sic] from this place of worship. They are considered sacred[154] by a sizeable Muslim minority and should be respected.
>
> In case the thief wasn't aware, stealing is a sin in Islam and ALLAH sees all.

[153] Some *turbas* are inscribed with the names of the Ahlulbayt. This itself is an object of contention, with one of my research participants remarking that: "We're praying to Allah, why are the Imams' names on any *turba*… It's ridiculous" (Author fieldnotes, 10 October 2014).
[154] As mentioned above, not all Shi'is consider *turbas* to be sacred; rather, they simply represent something natural and "pure" on which to pray (and can be replaced by any other natural object).

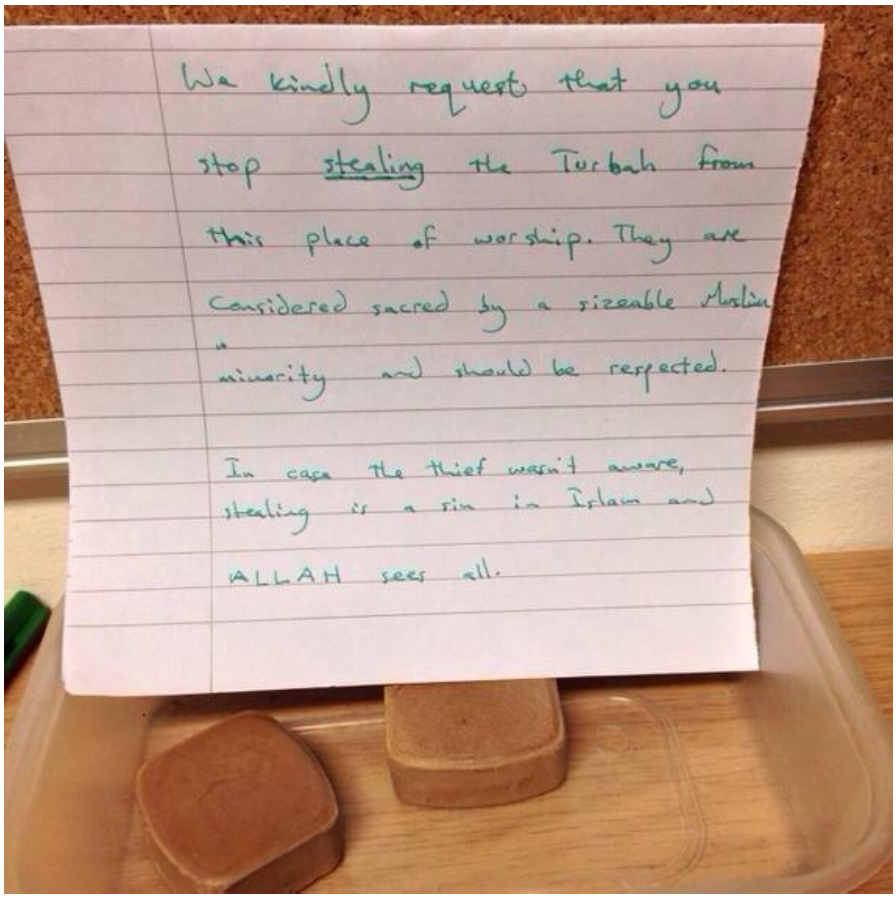

Fig. 6 – "Allah sees all"
Source: Author's fieldnotes, 11 October 2014.

This incident is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, it indicates that the *turbas* in this context do not simply signify ritual objects of prayer, they also represent the beliefs and, most importantly, presence of "a sizeable Muslim minority" within the context of a multi-faith prayer room in multicultural London. In this sense, the *turbas* have become a statement regarding the existence and rights of the Shi'a minority in the UK; not only are Shi'is understood to have the right to display their religious objects in a multi-faith location, this right is seen as a significant act of representation and self-determination (such language is itself reflective of the discourse of "Shi'a Rights" explored in the previous chapter). Secondly, the transformation of the *turbas* from ritual object to claim for minority representation points to the increasing objectification and commodification of Shi'ism as a minority religious identity. This is especially true in light of the fact that

the use of *turbas* is not required in Shi'a doctrine, and indeed may be substituted by any natural object during prayer. As one Iraqi Shi'i who grew up in Syria remarked:

> I remember in Syria, when we used to go and pray in the mosque, my father would tell us to look for the straw matting at the edge of the carpets, or a piece of paper, or even to just pray on top of our fingernails. Since Syria was majority Sunni, we didn't want to draw attention to the fact that we were Shi'a.[155]

In this sense, the insistence of the ABSoc members on installing *turbas* in the prayer room can be understood not just as a commitment to religious observance, but as a visible and public display of their minority (Shi'a) status through the use of objects. Here the object (*turba*) comes to stand in for the very practice of Shi'a observance it is intended to represent; the very act of placing the *turbas* in the prayer room thus becoming an act of Shi'a faith and identity over and above the *turbas'* practical use as objects to facilitate prayer.

Moreover, Shi'a objects such as *turbas* do not simply serve to represent the rights and status of Shi'i minorities within the UK context, they also serve to embed the representation of Shi'a identity within a global system of symbolic capital and ethno-religious commodification. *Turbas* themselves are commodities that can be bought and sold on the market; indeed, the monetary and symbolic value of any individual *turba* stems not just from its status as a ritual object, but also from the circumstances surrounding its acquisition. For example, *turbas* bought in Karbala or other holy Shi'a sites and inscribed with the name of Imam Hussain or Ali are seen to be of greater "value" than those which are plain or have been bought in other non-sacred locations. Indeed, during a pilgrimage trip to Iran in June 2015, I was surprised to see Z, a 24-year-old

[155] Author interview with Abu M, 2 April 2017.

Canadian-born Iraqi Shi'a, bring her own *turba* to pray in the Fatima Ma'asouma mosque in Qom (where there are hundreds, if not thousands, of *turbas* available throughout the shrine). When questioned, she told me that she had bought this particular *turba* in Imam Ali's shrine in Najaf, and therefore she considered it to be more "holy" than the plain *turbas* on offer at the mosque.

Such perceptions contribute to a "market" for *turbas*, in which those sold at locations considered to be more "sacred" (such as the holy shrines in Iraq and Iran) are sold for higher values than those elsewhere. In Mashhad, for example, I was specifically told not to buy any *turbas* from the stalls along the street leading to the Imam Reza shrine, since they would be more expensive than those sold in Tehran or elsewhere. This differentiated market for *turbas* thus works to render such ritual objects as "Shi'a commodities"; objects whose acquisition serves to mark the owner as visibly and identifiably "Shi'a" within a recognisable semiotic system of meaning and that, moreover, serves to differentiate different practicing Shi'is based on the associated "value" and status of the *turbas* that they buy and display. As Navaro-Yashin remarks in the context of secularist and Islamist markets in modern Turkey: "A politics of identity [has] become a politics over symbols in the context of consumerism" (Navaro-Yashin, 2001: 110). The *turbas*, as commodities, have themselves thus come to represent the very Shi'a identity that they are being made to stand in for.

The acquisition and presentation of various kinds of *tubas* thus works not only to mark the individual using them as "Shi'a", the differentiated value of those *turbas* seen as more "sacred" (and therefore more expensive) also functions as a way to represent status amongst Shi'is themselves – whether by signalling particular individuals as more "pious" than others (for example in carrying their own "sacred" *turba* with them), or as of a higher socio-economic status (in indicating that they have the funds to be able to afford

their own personal *turba* rather than use the communal ones provided by the mosque). In this sense, the notion of "being Shi'a" has come to be represented through the commodification and consumption of religious objects. This is hardly something new in Shi'a religious tradition; indeed, the entire concept of "Shi'aness" (as of any other ethno-religious identity) has been objectified and commodified throughout history through association with the iconography of the Ahl al-Bayt and the symbolic event of the Battle of Karbala (and later with the Iranian Revolution). As Pinto states:

> The process of mass production is a central element in the "cultural biography" of the Shi'i religious imagery, as it objectifies and homogenises it as a commodity that can be evaluated in the the transactions of the market… The objectification of the various meanings and values condensed in the dominant symbols of the Shi'i tradition and their codification in images or objects make these meanings and values more explicit and conscious to the faithful. (Pinto, 2007: 118)

Such Shi'a commodities are not limited to ritual objects such as *turbas*,[156] but also encompass other visible markers of Shi'a-specific identity such as displaying images and iconography associated with the Ahl al-Bayt, the wearing of religious garments such as certain styles of hijab or *yashmagh*, the green scarves worn by Sayyids (descendants of the Prophet Muhammad), and the sporting of Shi'a-specific fashion items. It is this last category that I wish to explore in the following section, especially when it comes to the way in which Shi'a fashion is being used and displayed in the contemporary diasporic context.

[156] Other examples of such religious objects include *sibha* (prayer beads, often made out of precious gems or stones for added value), rings and jewellery inscribed with the names of the Ahlulbayt or in the shape of the *saif Ali* (the two-pronged sword carried by Imam Ali), posters depicting Imam Hussain or Imam Ali, etc.

Shi'a Fashion: "My Heart Beats Hussain"

There are a number of visible signals, most notably through styles of dress and fashion, that can serve to mark an individual as recognisably "Shi'a" within a wider socio-symbolic discursive field. Shi'a scholars, for example, traditionally wear long robes and either white or black turbans (depending on whether or not they are Sayyids), while non-scholarly Sayyids (in particular merchants in Baghdad's *shorja* souq) traditionally would have worn a red *tarbush*[157] wrapped with a green cloth (this latter tradition was phased out under Saddam's regime, as it served as a recognisable marker of Shi'a identity; although during the course of my research I came across a campaign by a young British-born Iraqi Shi'i who was attempting to instigate a campaign to bring this particular garment back into fashion within the Shi'a community in London). Shi'a women also have the option of different styles of *hijab* (if they choose to wear it), with the wearing of Iranian-style *chadors* and veils covering the chin as a way of demonstrating both religious and political commitment to the doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih*. *Hijabs* can also be used to reflect the relative piety and socio-economic status of the wearer, with more conservative and older women tending to opt for muted colours and simple fabrics while many fashion-conscious younger women often choose to match the colour and style of their *hijab* to their outfit; similarly, synthetic or simple cotton *hijabs* can convey a different socio-economic status than more expensive fabrics such as silk or merino wool (Deeb, 2011; Navaro-Yashin, 2001, 2002). In this way, dress not only serves to mark individuals out as members of the Shi'a sect, but can also be used to differentiate both between different schools of Shi'a thought and between individuals of different academic, socio-economic, and religious status.

[157] A type of hat, comparable to the North-African *fez*.

Other Shi'a-specific fashion items, beyond the wearing of black and green during Muharram, include the display of wearable symbols of religious iconography, such as jewellery inscribed with the names of the Ahl al-Bayt or in the shape of the *saif Ali* (the two-pronged sword carried by Imam Ali), and rings made from precious stones believed to have particular powers. These symbols tap into the rich history of Shi'a mythology and iconography (in particular the myths surrounding the Battle of Karbala), and serve as visible markers of "Shi'a identity". For example, during a pilgrimage tour of Iran in June 2015 I recall Z, the same Canadian-born Iraqi woman who brought her own *turba* to the Fatima Ma'asouma shrine, and who had recently relocated to Najaf showing me a small tattoo of the saif Ali she had on her wrist and remarking that: "I don't do *taqiyyah*.[158] My mum was so mad when I got it because if ISIS catch me I'm dead" (Author fieldnotes, 8 June 2015). The fact that this young woman chose to physically and permanently inscribe a marker of her Shi'a identity onto her skin can be understood as a move towards minority self-determination and a positive affirmation of sectarian identity; albeit one couched in consumerist terms (after all, a tattoo is still a commodity that also serves as a marker of a particular social status and is associated with particular tropes surrounding alternative youth identity and rebellion against authority).

Along with such religious iconography, there is also a growing market for Shi'a fashion items that draw on and reflect the changing lifestyles of contemporary Shi'is in the diaspora. For example, it is now possible to buy iPhone and iPad covers depicting images of Shi'a shrines, or inscribed with Shi'a religious messages, as well as hoodies and t-shirts that declare "My Heart Beats Hussain" (complete with ECG heartbeat), or Imam Hussain

[158] *Taqiyyah* is the practice of dissimulation by which Shi'a Muslims do not publically declare their sectarian affiliation. Although there is a considerable amount of scholarly debate around the practice, it is generally thought to originate from the first days of Shi'ism's inception and developed as a self-protection strategy for Shi'is throughout history who found themselves as a (sometimes persecuted) minority.

wristbands and armbands inscribed with the words: "What Do I Stand For?" (akin to the "What Would Jesus Do?" Evangelical Christian wristbands).

Fig. 7 – "What Do I Stand For?" smartphone cases for sale at the 2014 Imam Hussain Conference. Source: Author's Fieldnotes.

Fig. 8 – "My Heart Beats Hussain" hoodie.
Source: www.theislamicstore.org, accessed 14 August 2017.

Through the consumption and display of such items, practicing Shi'is in the diaspora can visibly mark their bodies as recognisably and definably Shi'a at the same time as they make certain statements about their lifestyle and fashion choices within the context of global consumer capitalism (such as owning an iPhone, or wearing a "cool" hoodie). In this sense, "Shi'aness" has become a consumable object in its own right, a product of the same market forces that differentiate and define the different lifestyles and identities to which individuals wish to ascribe through processes of commodification and consumption. Just as the symbolic and affective resonance of the *turbas* described above came to reside in their inscription in a recognisably "Shi'a" register of piety and religious minority self-determination within the context of multicultural London, so too do objects such as Shi'a iPhone cases and hoodies come to be consumed and coveted in their own right within the global diasporic context, rather than for any inherent element of religiosity or spirituality.

Indeed, many more conservative and older practicing Shi'is told me that they disapproved of this move towards the commodification and conspicuous consumption of Shi'a fashion items (most often, though not exclusively, by the younger generation); one woman even remarked that: "The *shabab* [youth], they don't understand what it means to be Shi'a, they're just interested in fashion. They take religion by the arse."[159] On the other hand, many of those who engage in such conspicuous consumption of Shi'a objects arguably do so precisely *because* they believe that such items serve to enhance their religiosity or spirituality, thus signalling the hegemonic power of consumer capitalism in the contemporary world through the internalisation of market forces productive of the contemporary Shi'a subject.

[159] Informal conversation with Um Zainab, November 2014.

In this sense, the commodification and consumption of "Shi'a objects" has resulted in the fetishisation of Shi'ism itself (at least in the diaspora), in which "Shi'a identity" has become an object to be bought and sold on the market in the same manner as the commodities through which it comes to find expression. Moreover, this move towards the fetishisation of Shi'ism mirrors the way in which consumer capitalism works to produce and segment market identities that can be sold to consumers through the conspicuous consumption of goods (Appadurai, 1994; Billig, 1999; Navaro-Yashin et al., 2002; Žižek, 2005; among others). In the context of contemporary consumer capitalism, which works to package and market identities to consumers through the objectification of identity, specific ways of being visibly and intelligibly "Shi'a" are thus rendered commodities to be bought and displayed in the same manner as other forms of conspicuous belonging. This is not to claim that such conspicuous consumption is the *only* way to be "Shi'a" in the contemporary world (indeed, many pious and conservative Shi'is would argue the opposite), but that the commodification of "Shi'aness" as a minority ethno-religious category is part of the wider global market for identities that is productive of the sectarianised and diasporic Shi'a subject under investigation here. As one of my research participants commented: "Religion is a way to control people. It's a marketing tool, a brand."[160]

Buying Spirituality: The "Shi'a Industry"

Along with such objective markers of commodified "Shi'a identity", there is also an increasing number of activities, goods, and services specifically marked as "Shi'a" within the diasporic context that together form the basis of what Spellman-Poots calls the "Shi'a industry" (Spellman-Poots, forthcoming 2017.). For example, practicing Shi'is are able to fulfil their religious commitment to charitable action by donating to Shi'a-run charities such as the Al-Ayn Foundation, the Iraqi Children's Aid and Repair Endeavour (ICARE),

[160] Informal conversation with Abu D, 30 October 2015 (Author fieldnotes)

the Imam Hussain Blood Donation Campaign (an offshoot of the Islamic Unity Society and affiliated to the NHS) and the "Who Is Hussain?" campaign, most of which have links to the Shi'a religious establishment.[161] Such charitable donations are undertaken in addition to the annual *khums* tax (literally "one fifth"), whereby practicing Shi'is donate one fifth of their disposable income to the *marja'iyya* to be distributed to the poor and needy.[162] In the diasporic context, the *khums* is usually handled by the representatives of *maraji'* such as the Al-Khoei Foundation (Ayatollah Sistani), Islamic Centre of England (Ayatollah Khamenei), and the Imam Ali Foundation (Ayatollah Sistani). Indeed, the global channelling of money and resources through the *khums* makes up a significant part of the annual income of the *marja'iyya*, and has attracted a considerable amount of controversy regarding accusations of corruption and embezzlement (Cockburn, 2008; Cole, 2002; Corboz, 2014; Mallat, 1988; Skocpol, 1982; Walbridge, 2001). A forum thread on the ShiaChat website entitled "Enquiry in Khums Accounts of Marjas", for example, lists account figures from the Al-Khoei Foundation in London from 2008 in which the total income from *khums* was declared as £5,447, and draws the following conclusion:

> This is implausible. Where did the money go after being donated and then accounted for as just £5,447… We've been had boys, we've been made fools of… There is a massive gap between accounted *khums* and amount which is likely to have been actually donated, a staggering discrepancy in fact.[163]

[161] The Al-Ayn Foundation, for example, has a statement on its website declaring that "since its establishment, Al-Ayn has enjoyed the support and blessings of the Supreme Religious Authority Grand Ayatollah Al-Sayyid Ali Al-Hussaini Al-Sistani", the highest religious authority in Shi'a Islam; while the website of the Imam Hussain Blood Donation campaign includes quotes from various Shi'a scholars outlining the religious importance of giving blood.

[162] The *khums* is unique to Shi'ism, and is paid in addition to the charitable *zakat* tax required in Islam.

[163] Source: http://www.shiachat.com/forum/topic/234970661-enquiry-into-khums-accounts-of-marjas/?page=4, accessed 9 April 2017

Indeed, a number of my research participants expressed similar scepticism regarding the *khums*, with at least one interviewee commenting that it was "an easy way for them [the *marja'iyya*] to get rich".[164] There have also been cases where scholars have been exposed to have been embezzling funds collected via the *khums*. Despite such controversies, however, the vast majority of practicing Shi'is in the diaspora continue to donate one fifth of their disposable annual income to their *marja'* of choice. In this sense, the practice of *khums* serves not only to reinforce the clerical authority of the *marja'iyya* and the religious establishment, it inscribes individual Shi'is within a market for religious goods and services that replicates the logic of neoliberal capitalism.

Pilgrimage (*ziyara*) represents yet another way for practicing Shi'is to demonstrate their commitment to their religious identity through the acquisition of services. Such demand has spawned a marketplace of Shi'a-run travel companies and organisations specialising in facilitating the logistical practicalities of travel to the shrine cities of Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. In London alone, for example, companies offer clients a variety of different services, from organising youth pilgrimage trips (such as the Al-Asr Foundation, Islamic Unity Society, AIM, and HB Travel), individual travel and visa assistance (Safir Travel, Spiritual Journeys), and package tours, often for specific events such as Ashura, Arbaeen, Umra, and Hajj (Misbah Ul Hoda Tours, Al-Amdaar, Ziyarats.co.uk, Al-Mehdi Tours, and Haj and Umra Travel Ltd, to name but a few).

Such segmentation of the pilgrimage market reflects the varying requirements and preferences of Shi'is wishing to undertake such journeys, and replicates the logic of supply and demand inherent in neoliberal capitalism (cf. Pinto, 2007). Moreover, the practice of pilgrimage itself, which involves transfers of large numbers of people and resources across international borders, contributes to the ongoing commodification of

[164] Informal conversation with Abu M.

Shi'a ethno-religious identity through its reliance on the expanding market for religious goods and objects. As Pinto notes:

> The experiential character of pilgrimage entices the demand for objects and images that can embody the memory of the emotions and sensations produced by the physical and symbolic activities connected to pilgrimage, such as travelling, performing rituals, and being in contact with sacred object and beings. The production of such objects and images leads to the commoditisation of the religious tradition, enhancing the circulation and diffusion of the symbols, practices, and even doctrines thus objectified. (Pinto, 2007: 110)

For example, during a pilgrimage trip to Iran in 2015, the group I was with were charged USD 50 each to receive a meal directly from the Imam Reza shrine in Mashhad (a service that used to be provided free of charge, presumably before the income opportunity was realised). When I questioned the steepness of the price tag, I was told that it was worth it, since eating the food would give me "*baraka*" (blessings). Indeed, several of the girls on the trip dried and saved pieces of the bread we were given to take back to their families in the UK in the same way that they bought religious items such as prayer beads and *turbas* as keepsakes. In the context of pilgrimage, then, even food can become a desirable commodity to be bought and sold as a symbolic pathway towards salvation.

From the above, we can see how the global "Shi'a industry", where Shi'a objects, goods, and services are bought, sold, and exchanged within the global marketplace, is undergirded by a moral economy of consumption that works to construct and objectify a diasporic "Shi'a identity" predicated on spirituality, piety, emancipation, and minority representation (akin to the discourse of "Shi'a Rights"). In this sense, the identity category "Shi'a" that is available to diasporans can be understood both as a discursive semiotic system and as a product of symbolic and material manufacture. To assert a

"Shi'a identity" within the diasporic context is thus to actively identify with the Shi'a subject both as an articulatory place-holder and as an ethno-religious subject within the global market for identities. Such an act of identification can only make sense within a pre-existing social and discursive system whereby the concept of "otherness" can serve both as a marker of difference and as a marketable product of diversity. It is precisely this dual process that is fulfilled by neoliberal capitalism. As Žižek argues:

> This ever-growing flowering of groups and sub-groups in their hybrid and fluid, shifting identities, each insisting on the right to assert a specific way of life and/or culture, this incessant diversification, is possible and thinkable only against the background of capitalist globalisation; it is the very way capitalist globalisation affects our sense of ethnic and other forms of community belonging: the only link connecting these multiple groups is the link of Capital itself, always ready to satisfy the specific demands of each group and subgroup… (Žižek, 2000: 209–210)

The diasporic Shi'a subject is thus (at least partially) a direct product of neoliberal capitalism and of the processes of globalisation it facilitates, as well as a discursive product of the contemporary diasporic imaginary. Indeed, the very concept of a contemporary "Shi'a diaspora"[165] as a distinct and coherent entity that encompasses all Shi'i individuals – a community that is predominantly marked through ethno-religious, not national or cultural affiliation and thus to be differentiated from previous formulations of transnational Shi'ism or the "Shi'a international" predicated on the religious authority and knowledge of the *marja'iyya* (Corboz, 2014; Mallat, 1988) – can

[165] This is not to say that Shi'a diasporas did not exist prior to the current moment (indeed, as outlined in Chapter 2, Shi'ism has often been characterised as a quintessentially transnational politico-religious community), but rather that there is something qualitatively different about the kind of transnational, trans-ethnic, and commodified Shi'a subject currently being articulated within the diasporic imaginary.

itself be seen as resulting from the logic of capitalist globalisation. It is only through the spread of Shi'a individuals, symbols, objects, goods, and services across international borders that any sense of unified and coherent "Shi'a identity" can come to be distilled and essentialised from the diverse experiences of the individuals who make up this faith community.

Moreover, the way in which capitalism works to essentialise and objectify ethnic, religious, and cultural identity categories speaks against any notion of pre-existing or primordial identities, since this very primordialism is itself revealed to be a product of political and economic forces:

> [T]oday's postmodern ethnic or religious 'fundamentalism' and xenophobia are not only not 'regressive' but, on the contrary, offer the supreme proof of the final emancipation of the economic logic of the market from the attachment of the ethnic Thing. (Žižek, 2000: 215)

The inscription of the Shi'a subject into the global marketplace not only requires the notion of "Shi'a identity" to be reduced to essentialised categories, it also requires the creation of a non-Shi'a other against which this identity can come to be defined. It is for this reason that the capitalist Shi'a subject can also be understood as a *sectarianised* subject, since the assertion of a specific "Shi'a identity" involves an implicit and necessary differentiation from individuals and groups deemed to be "non-Shi'a", whether that be non-Muslims, Sunnis, Wahhabis, or society as a whole. In the contemporary diasporic context, saturated by the global logic of supply and demand and undergirded by discourses of emancipation and minority rights, the commodified Shi'a subject is by definition a sectarian subject, since it involves the assertion of a narrowly-defined ethno-religious identity over and above all others.

Shi'ism 2.0: Religion in the Digital Age

While the above section focused on the material inscription of "Shi'a identity" within contemporary capitalist modes of production and consumption, here I wish to focus instead on the ways in which the *virtual* world (most notably the Internet and social media) functions similarly to construct a "Shi'a public sphere" (cf. Habermas, 1989)[166] productive of the sectarianised Shi'a subject. Such virtual channels, I maintain, form part of a wider socio-symbolic discursive field within which notions of "Shi'aness" are rendered intelligible through the politics of differentiation and recognition (Bourdieu, 1979, 1985, 1991; Tilley, 2003). This virtual sphere can be roughly divided into the following categories: official religious websites and chatrooms; social media (encompassing websites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, online video and news channels, and individual blogs); and virtual activism. I will explore each of these categories briefly in turn to demonstrate the ways in which the conspicuous consumption of and participation in virtual ways of "being Shi'a" contribute to the commodification and fetishisation of Shi'a identity and the Shi'a subject as an object of consumer capitalism.

Creating Virtual Shi'a Spaces: Piety, Online

[166] Although the notion of the "public sphere" is most closely associated with the work of Jürgen Habermas, his oeuvre has been criticised by a considerable number of scholars for presenting a model of the public sphere that is both partial (Gitlin 1998; Thompson 2003; Ismail 2006; Graham and Khosravi 2002) and elitist (Fraser 1991; Çinar 2005). As Keane puts it: "The conventional ideal of a unified public sphere…[is] obsolete" (1995:1). However, such debates fall outside of the scope of the current inquiry, and as such will not be further developed here.

In order to remain relevant and relatable in today's connected world, most Shi'a scholars maintain active websites and chatrooms that facilitate communication between the marja'iyya and ordinary practicing Shi'is. For example, the office of Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani in Najaf, Iraq, runs an official website that serves as a repository of information regarding the scholar's teachings in English, Arabic, Farsi, Urdu, French, Turkish, and Azeri.[167] As well as offering an archive of Islamic texts and information on various Shi'a seminaries around the world, the website also has an interactive Question and Answer section where practicing Shi'is can submit personal questions, with the resulting answers categorised alphabetically and ranging from topics such as abortion, autopsy, bullfighting, cologne, cat hair, divorce, masturbation, organ donation, and tattoos. Along with such practical advice, the website also hosts a repository of affiliated institutions and charitable organisations to which individuals can donate.

Such official websites offer a way for practicing Shi'is to remain engaged and connected to their faith; as well as reinforcing the symbolic and spiritual dominance of the *marja'iyya* in defining and policing the boundaries of what constitutes "Shi'aness". Similarly, chatrooms such as ShiaChat[168] offer virtual spaces for practicing Shi'is from around the world to come together and engage with each other regarding matters of their faith. One of the most popular features of the website is the Guest Lounge, where unregistered members can pose questions regarding Shi'ism, Islam, and other topics to be answered by the ShiaChat community. As well as providing a way for Shi'is from diverse backgrounds to meet and engage with each other on matters of faith and religious practice, online communities such as ShiaChat allow Shi'is to reach out to people who share similar beliefs and lifestyles as themselves. Indeed, many of my younger research participants had made lasting friends via such chatrooms, especially

[167] www.sistani.org
[168] www.shiachat.com

in the early 2000s when these websites were most popular. As S, a 21-year-old British-born Pakistani Shi'a told me: "Oh my God, I was obsessed with ShiaChat! And now it's crazy because everyone knows each other. You can come on a [pilgrimage] trip to Iran or Iraq and meet people you were chatting with when you were 13." (Author fieldnotes, 8 June 2015).

In this way, these online chatrooms and forums constitute a virtual network of likeminded practicing Shi'is who often frequent similar social and religious circles (such as the pilgrimage tours, many of which are specifically aimed at youth and run by organisations such as Al-Asr and the Islamic Unity Society). Indeed, one young woman even told me that she used such forums as a way to find eligible Shi'a men she might potentially want to marry – since there was less stigma involved than attempting online dating. Rather than simply acting as a virtual Shi'a public sphere, these forums also work to mark the individuals who use them as ascribing to a particular form of Shi'a identity; one that values piety and religious practice but that is also sees itself as relatively progressive and modern. Participation in such chatrooms isn't merely a form of entertainment or passing the time, it is also a way to signal belonging to a virtual community of likeminded Shi'is in a way that is mutually intelligible to all involved.

Such virtual Shi'a spaces are thus both reflective and constitutive of a particular way of "being Shi'a" within the online world – one that is simultaneously marked by discourses of piety and religious observance at the same time as it forms part of the objectification and commodification of "Shi'aness" through the segmentation of the global market for identities. These virtual communities work to structure the kinds of identification available to individuals by bracketing-off corners of the Internet to be defined and policed as "Shi'a". Nevertheless, these remain relatively self-selective and self-referential

Shi'a spaces, and do not represent the full diversity of different forms of Shi'a identification and practice within the virtual sphere.

Social Media: Performing "Shi'aness"

If religious websites and chatrooms offer a place for likeminded pious Shi'is to converge and discuss issues without input or interference from non-Shi'is, social media more broadly – especially platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram – represent a virtual space within which a more publically-oriented sense of "Shi'aness" can be projected and displayed. With their focus on external audience, social media "frequently employ exhibitions, such as lists of status updates and sets of photos, alongside situational activities, such as chatting" (Hogan, 2010: 377) whereby individuals promote and define their identity through practices that constitute a performative "presentation of self" (ibid). Significantly, however, the kinds of identity performatively rendered through such practices are already prescribed and constrained by the socio-symbolic discursive field in which they are articulated. For example, performative iterations of "Shi'aness" function, through social media, to simultaneously police and define the contours of the Shi'a subject as discursively rendered in the virtual world. Social media thus represent a publically visible way for individuals to code their belonging to different in-groups through recognisable patterns of performative action that, in turn, come to be consumed and reproduced by others. In this way, social media can be understood as an extension of commodified identities, whereby individuals and groups "increasingly code their personal politics through personal lifestyle values… [that] echo across the porous boundaries of product and political advertising" (Bennet, 2012: 22).

Of course, the types of identities enacted through social media are not limited to those defined by ethno-religious affiliation; but it is possible to trace the ways in which the contours of a Shi'a-specific identity are being performatively defined through the use of

such platforms. One way practicing Shi'is demonstrate their commitment to their religion, for example, is by posting images of themselves undertaking pilgrimage to the holy shrines in Iraq and Iran, often accompanied by descriptions outlining the individual's spiritual journey and emotional attachment to the Ahl al-Bayt and Shi'ism more broadly. Individuals also frequently make use of the "About" section on sites such as Facebook to demonstrate their belonging to an (ethno-)religious community. For example, K, a 24-year-old British-born Iraqi Shi'i has listed her place of origin as "Najaf, Iraq" on her Facebook profile, despite the fact that she has never lived outside the UK. By defining herself not just as Iraqi, but specifically as coming from the holy shrine city of Najaf, K is discursively placing herself within the boundaries of a Shi'a-specific ethno-religious identity that, in turn, works to performatively produce the Shi'a subject with which she is identifying.

Social media thus present a way for Shi'is to both demonstrate their personal belonging and identification with "being Shi'a", as well as to publically define and promote what being Shi'a means within the contemporary moment. Moreover, such networks are also used to police the boundaries of acceptable behaviour and define the division between in-group (Shi'a) and out-group (most frequently Sunni Muslims seen as "anti-Shi'a"). Take the following altercation between L, a young British Shi'a, and Z, a British Sunni Muslim, which resulted from a Facebook post by the latter linking to an article about the "threat" posed by Shi'a militias in Kurdistan:

Fig. 9 – "Shi'a Militias Are the Real Threat". Source: Facebook (accessed 3 April 2017)

This post resulted in L deciding to "unfriend" Z, but only after posting the following (public) message:

> AoA [Angle of Attack], I am deleting you from my Facebook as you are consistently posting anti-Shi'a lies and propaganda. I am also tired of the garbage that is shared on my timeline (generally by you) from Zakir Naik and Bilal Phillips.[169] We all have our views and I think you have failed to respect that. Have a nice life. (Author fieldnotes, January 2016)

Through this exchange, both young women are articulating mutually exclusive sectarian identities that serve to mark them as belonging to a particular in-group. Moreover, by publically denouncing Z and accusing her of spreading "anti-Shi'a lies and propaganda", L is making a claim regarding the place and status of Shi'a minorities at the same time as this claim works to effectively police the boundaries of what this Shi'a identity constitutes. The discursive and sectarianised Shi'a subject constructed by this exchange

[169] Both Naik and Phillips are Sunni preachers who have been banned from the UK for harbouring "extremist views" and "sympathising with terrorism".

is one that prioritises representation and recognition, at the expense of coexistence and freedom of speech. Rather than simply accepting that people might hold opinions that differ considerably from her own, L refuses to further engage with Z or to acknowledge the potential nuances of the political situation in Iraq and instead chooses to exclude her from any further debate. In the act of attempting to defend what she perceives to be a threat to her understanding of "Shi'aness", L has effectively constructed her Shi'a identity in opposition to Z's Sunni one. In this way, "Shi'aness" comes to be defined as an oppositional and defensive identity.

A similar sentiment regarding anti-Shi'a "discrimination" by certain Sunni factions was echoed by S, a young Shi'a student, who posted on the public Facebook page "Banned at [University]" with the following comment:

> Just have to rant. The amount of Shi'a hate is astounding at [University]. The Sunni groups view those who support the Ahlulbayt as some kind of monsters and refuse to acknowledge the hatred that is spewed from the mouths of groups like the MSA [Muslim Students' Association] or the Palestinian society… I am constantly attacked just for pointing out that there is a real streak of discrimination in Palestine for the Shi'a. (Source: Facebook, accessed 12 February 2016)

Such statements serve to construct the terms of the debate, and work to performatively construct Shi'ism as a politically-salient identity category invested in the discourse of equality and minority rights. Again, a nuanced political context (in this case, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict) is selectively used to demonstrate the marginalisation and persecution of Shi'a minorities in a way that contributes to the sectarianisation of the Shi'a subject.

While social media sites thus offer practicing Shi'is a way to actively engage in and exhibit their commitment to a Shi'a-specific identity, other channels offer a more passive form of media consumption aimed at the Shi'a market. Examples of these kinds of media include online video channels such as Ahlulbayt TV and Safeer TV, which host videos on religious and lifestyle topics, as well as interviews with leading Shi'a religious and societal figures. As well as this, many *hussainiyyat* in the UK offer online video streaming services of religious events, particularly during Muharram. Such media represent a way for practicing Shi'is to consume information and advice regarding what it means to be Shi'a, and are thus involved in the production of the pious Shi'a subject with which individuals are able to identify. While most of these channels are run on a charitable basis, they demonstrate the breadth and diversity of the Shi'a-specific online market, suggesting that individuals are looking to consume forms of media that reflect and replicate the kinds of identities they wish to affirm for themselves.

Finally, individual blogs function in a similar way to social media by offering practicing Shi'is a virtual platform via which to define and promote their self-ascribed identity. Examples of blog posts that are actively involved in constructing and portraying a specific kind of Shi'a subject (often through recourse to the "coming-out" discourse discussed in Chapter 4) include "Proud to be Shi'a",[170] "My Proud Shi'a",[171] "Shi'a Muslem" [sic][172] and "I am Shi'a".[173] While this list only represents a small sample of the kinds of blogs written and run by Shi'is around the world, it demonstrates the way in which the notion of "Shi'a identity" has become a recognisable discursive trope that can be performatively enacted by individuals via the replication of specific linguistic and

[170] www.proudtobeshia-blog-tumblr.com
[171] www.my-proud-shia36.tumblr.com
[172] www.shia-muslem.blogspot.co.uk
[173] www.iamshia.blogspot.com

visual paradigms (such as posting images of the shrine cities, promoting Shi'a religious events such as Muharram and Ashura, or quoting aphorisms attributed to the Ahl al-Bayt) that serve to mark them as distinguishably and recognisably "Shi'a".

In this sense, blogs, just as other forms of online media, act as a virtual market for identities, in which particular patterns of behaviour and consumption come to performatively construct the category of "Shi'aness" in a way that reflects the fetishisation and commodification of the Shi'a subject through the accumulation and possession of Shi'a-specific objects and commodities (in this case, virtual and symbolic objects). Within the context of the postmodern contemporary era, the divisions between online and offline lives have become increasingly blurred to the extent to which identity performances come to be replicated across multiple platforms simultaneously (Bennett, 2012) and individuals are able to mark their belonging to a particular identity category through recognisable patterns of consumption and display that transcend the boundaries between "real" and "virtual" worlds. It is through such patterns of performance and articulation that the contours of the Shi'a subject come to be defined and recognised, which, in turn, allows this "Shi'a identity" to be branded and fetishised as a commodity to be bought and sold within the global market

Virtual Activism: Promoting Shi'ism

As well as such personal displays of Shi'a performative identity, online media are also frequently used to engage in collaborative and public-facing campaigns and outreach. Indeed, there is an important extent to which Shi'a religious organisations and authorities are actively encouraging practicing Shi'is to make use of such channels to promote the visibility of Shi'a minorities worldwide and to make specific claims about the rights and representation of these minorities. For example, in a blog post entitled

"Islamic propagation in the age of new media" posted on the (UK-based) AIM website, the author argues that:

> Even if someone is *a minority within a minority*,[174] a well planned and executed social media campaign can propel them to a position in which their reach can go beyond what was previously possible, or even available, with very little initial expenditure. Previously to reach a large audience, one way to go about it would be to host a channel on the UK's biggest satellite channel provider. That would set one back half a million pounds annually before even spending a penny on the creation of content let alone marketing and other expenses. However, social media has the potential to reach millions all over the world at a fraction of the cost.[175]

The power of social media to "spread the message" of Shi'a Islam was recently exemplified by Ayatollah Khamenei, the current religious leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, who in January 2015 posted a series of messages on Twitter which formed part of an open letter addressed to "the Youth in Europe and North America" and encouraging them not to "miss the opportunity to gain proper, correct and unbiased understanding of Islam":

> I address you, the youth, not because I disregard your parents; rather, it is because I see the future of your peoples and nations to lie in your hands and the quest for truth to be more alive and conscious in your hearts.[176]

[174] A reference to Shi'a minorities in the UK and West more broadly.
[175] Source: http://www.aimislam.com/islamic-propagation-in-the-age-of-new-media/, accessed 22 July 2017.
[176] Source: http://www.aimislam.com/ayatollah-khamenei-writes-letter-to-the-youth-of-the-west/, accessed 22 July 2017.

While Khamenei's letter specifically referred to "Islam" without delineating different sects, the use of social media by such a prominent (and controversial) Shi'a political and clerical figure is indicative of the way in which virtual media is increasingly being used as a way to promote specific political and religious visions of Islam (and Shi'a Islam in particular). Such cases form part of a wider network of social media and online activism via which both individual practicing Shi'is and Shi'a organisations and institutions can discursively produce and circulate specific understandings of what it means to be "(a good) Shi'a". For example, in October 2014 I was sent a round-robin Whatsapp message from Mehdi, a young Iraqi Shi'a student encouraging all his contacts to spread the word regarding potential upcoming media coverage of the Camp Speicher massacre in Iraq:

> The editor of Channel 4 News, tomorrow morning, will look at the stories they've put out and determine what the most important to cover is. One of them is the story of a survivor from Camp Speicher. Let's show Channel 4 how important the slaughter of Shi'a by ISIS is tonight by Watching and Sharing [sic] the Camp Speicher report all over your networks on Twitter, FB [Facebook], and Whatsapp before tomorrow morning.
>
> It's not often the massacre of innocent Shi'as is shown on the news. Let's show them that Shi'a blood is as precious as any other. Let's get sharing, viewing, tweeting, and commenting. (Author's fieldnotes, October 2014)

This particular message exemplifies the ways in which the discourse of "Shi'a Rights" explored in the previous chapter is being articulated and circulated within the virtual public sphere in ways that promote particular ways of doing an envisaging "Shi'aness" that is similarly founded on a Shi'a-specific ethics of victimhood and emancipation.

While the above example represents grassroots community activism enacted through personal networks, there are also a significant number of organisations and campaigns that make use of similar channels that work together to discursively produce the contours of the Shi'a subject as articulated within the virtual world. In the previous chapter, I touched upon social media campaigns such as International Shi'a Day (exemplified by the hashtag #612ShiaDay) and #Anti-Shiism run by Shi'a Rights Watch, but there is another significant and influential campaign that I have yet to explore in detail: that of "Who is Hussain?"

The "Who is Hussain?" campaign was started in 2012 by a group of young Shi'is in London from various ethno-national backgrounds and began as a way "to inspire people through the timeless example of Hussain and bring positive change in the world we live in."[177] Currently, the organisation is active in 27 countries worldwide, and uses a mixture of social media, online activism, and public awareness campaigns to promote the message of Imam Hussain in the name of a "common humanity" and "shared human understanding". As one of the organisations' founding members asserted in an online interview published on *The Muslim Vibe*:

> Hussain was a paragon of peace, justice, compassion, and morality… Hussain was a great leader and a tremendous visionary. Whilst he, his family members, and his companions were threatened and later slain, Hussain always had the end goal in mind: a more equitable society, one without an immoral and oppressive tyrant at the helm.[178]

[177] Source: https://whoisHussain.org/the-organisation/about-us/, accessed 22 July 2017.
[178] Source: https://themuslimvibe.com/featured/behind-who-is-Hussain, accessed 22 July 2017.

The language and imagery here is evocative of the Karbala paradigm, and replicates the ethically-inflected discourse of "Shi'a Rights" to discursively produce a vision of Shi'a Islam that sees it as part of a wider global movement towards justice, equality, and morality. In this sense, the "Who is Hussain?" campaign can be seen as part of a wider socio-symbolic discursive field – both on- and off-line – that works to promote particular iterations of "Shi'aness" invested in the ethical imperative to "*be* (a) *good* (Shi'a)".

Such forms of virtual activism thus represent specific ways of *being* and *doing* "Shi'aness" that are reflective of the politics of difference and recognition with a wider socially-constructed system of meaning. These specific iterations of "Shi'aness" are implicitly predicated on the construction of a non-Shi'a other and thus work to unconsciously sectarianise the Shi'a subject thus articulated. Moreover, this Shi's subject functions, within the virtual "Shi'a public sphere" as a kind of ethno-commodity (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009) to be produced, displayed, and consumed within the online environment. In this sense, the virtual production of "Shi'aness" should be seen as an extension of, and not separate to, the workings of neoliberal consumer capitalism when it comes to to commodification and objectification of identity.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have exemplified the ways in which the notion of a specific "Shi'a identity" has been manufactured, commodified, consumed, and exchanged through the workings of consumer capitalism. Such processes have provided the discursive and material scaffolding for the emergence of a socio-symbolic Shi'a subject that combines tropes of Shi'a victimhood and ethics with a claim for Shi'a minority representation and visibility within the diasporic imaginary. The rise of globalised modes of commodification and identity fetishism, in which both individual and group identities are increasingly being constructed as objectified "goods" to be bought and sold

on the global market, has thus arguably contributed to the sectarianisation of the Shi'a subject through the cultivation of clear in- and out-group boundaries, and has led to an essentialisation and fetishisation of the identity category "Shi'a".

While the focus of the chapter has been on the patterns of production and consumption encountered within the diasporic Shi'a imaginary – whether through the cultivation and display of material Shi'a objects or the virtual performance of "Shi'a identity" through the Internet and social media – the argument here should not be understood as a claim towards the subjective understandings or orientation of individuals as much as the collective and social articulation of what it means to be "Shi'a" in the contemporary context. In other words, the subject of this chapter – and of the thesis as a whole – is not individual practicing Shi'is themselves, but the production, articulation, performance, and dissemination of the discursive Shi'a subject that is enacted through the ensemble of such individual behaviours. The Shi'a subject is primarily a product of socially-embedded lived reality, and works to shape the kinds of subjective identifications and attachments available to individuals, but it remains both analytically and conceptually distinct from the individuals who express it and instead sheds light on the wider workings of discursive and hegemonic power within the contemporary world.

In this way, the diasporic Shi'a subject whose emergence was traced in chapters 1-4 has come to be inscribed within contemporary modes of material and discursive power through the workings of the global market. The shift from national to ethno-religious forms of identification, and the discursive construction and policing of the Shi'a subject through mechanisms of production and consumption, should therefore be seen as a logical outcome of the contemporary world in which it is being articulated, and not as a throwback to a primordial or essentialised sectarian "essence". The sectarianisation of the Shi'a subject is thus a necessary and inescapable by-product of the articulation of an

increasingly specific “Shi’a identity” predicated on the contemporary politics of difference and recognition; an insight that serves to unsettle the binary normative logic of the received wisdom that sees sectarianism as an unquestionably “bad thing” and to open up further questions about the potential repercussions of similar minority ethnic and religious identity-productions around the world.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have traced the emergence of what I call the sectarianised Shi'a diasporic subject as a discursive construction cultivated and articulated across multiple contexts. In particular, I have been concerned with demonstrating how the sectarianisation of this subject takes place as an *unconscious product of identity-formation*, and is tied in with the contemporary discursive ideological power structures of capitalism, (neo)liberalism, humanitarianism, and minority rights, as well as arising as a result of the specificities of the diasporic experience itself. Each of the five substantive chapters has focused on one particular element of Shi'a ethno-religious subject formation within the contemporary diasporic context – thus offering five fleeting snapshots of the sectarianised Shi'a subject that together build a more cohesive, albeit still partial, understanding of the various discursive forces and power structures working to produce this subject within the current moment.

Here, I would like to draw together the various thematic and empirical threads of the preceding chapters in order to demonstrate that they not only form contiguous parts of a more substantive whole, but that they represent overlapping and mutually supportive elements with regards to the formation of the sectarianised diasporic Shi'a subject. In particular, I wish to tease out the concepts of discourse, identity, ideology, and unconscious running throughout the thesis in order to demonstrate how the various articulations and manifestations of the Shi'a subject as encountered through the empirical material presented in each chapter are representative of the differential (and unconscious) (re)production of sectarianism within the diasporic context. While the focus of this thesis has primarily been on the construction of an emerging and sectarianised Shi'a subject within the discursive diasporic imaginary – and the practices of identification that work to sustain this subject – it is also necessary to acknowledge

the various ways in which individuals may seek to challenge, reinterpret, reimagine, or alter this subject through (re)iterative practices of identification and dis-identification. Although space limitations have prevented me from thoroughly exploring such a line of inquiry throughout the thesis as a whole, it would be impossible to conclude such a theoretical and empirical project without at least touching on this aspect of identity formation.

Finally, I set out possible avenues worthy of investigation if this research project were to be augmented further. One of the greatest challenges of researching and writing a doctoral thesis is the process of selection and refinement that necessarily requires the discarding, or at least sidelining, of large amounts of rich empirical data in order to produce a cohesive and structured argument. In the final part of this conclusion, I explore some of the alternative themes that emerged throughout my fieldwork regarding the role and function of the sectarianised diasporic Shi'a subject – including the implications this subject has regarding issues such as gender, minority Muslim identities in the West, and diasporic mobilisation.

Discourse and Identity: Producing the Shi'a Subject

While there are multiple ways to identify as "Shi'a" or to articulate and perform attachments to particular manifestations of "Shi'aness", this thesis has been fundamentally preoccupied with documenting the emergence of one specific form of Shi'a identity construction as encountered throughout the research process – the identity construction I have called *the sectarianised diasporic Shi'a subject*. This subject should be understood as a fundamentally discursive construction, conceptually and analytically separate from the individuals who (may or may not) choose to identify with it. This analytical distinction between the Shi'a subject as the subject of discourse and individual Shi'is themselves draws on insights from Lacanian psychoanalysis and critical

discourse analysis and is ultimately crucial to the theoretical and empirical argument of the thesis as a whole. Specifically, adopting such a theoretical framework has allowed me to make claims about the content, structure, and political implications of the Shi'a diasporic subject without assuming that every single practicing Shi'i in the diaspora – or indeed every one of my research participants – approaches or articulates this subject in the same way. Rather, the collective ensemble of individual articulations and practices should be understood as a palimpsest of discursive architecture undergirding the socio-symbolic construction of what it means to be "Shi'a" in the contemporary world.

Neither do I claim that the sectarianised diasporic Shi'a subject whose discursive production I explore throughout the thesis is the *only* contemporary manifestation of Shi'a ethno-politico-religious identity within the diaspora – or even that it is the most relevant or important to my research subjects. Instead, the discussion of the thesis should be seen as arising from my personal and theoretical puzzlement with the kinds of identity articulations I encountered during the research process, and which spoke of an emergent sense of Shi'a-specific identity construction as yet to be adequately explored within the literature on Shi'ism or Muslim minorities more broadly. In particular, the discursive construction of "Shi'ism" and "Shi'aness" as categories in and of themselves went against many of my initial assumptions regarding the structure and content of Shi'a identity articulations by Iraqi Shi'is in the diaspora, where I expected notions of Shi'a religious belonging to be tempered by, and potentially secondary to, identifications with "Iraqi" national or ethno-cultural origin (or even to notions of a broader "British Muslim" identity). The argument of this thesis thus emerged as a result of my own attempts to make sense of the kinds of material encountered within the field, and in particular to understand the ways in which particularistic and sectarianised constructions of Shi'a-specific identity were increasingly being articulated within the contemporary diasporic imaginary.

In order to understand the political and social origins of the emergent Shi'a diasporic subject, the thesis began with an exploration of the historical and psychic architecture underpinning Iraqi Shi'a migration to the UK, and in particular on the enduring legacy of the traumatic and melancholic experience of exile and displacement experienced by these individuals under Saddam Hussain's Ba'th regime. The combined effect of the discursive and physical marginalisation of Iraqi Shi'is under the structurally sectarian Ba'th regime, coupled with the nostalgia of exile and the discursive rupture produced by the US-led invasion of 2003 and ensuing sectarian violence, thus undergirded a shift away from nationalistic and towards ethno-sectarian forms of belonging (whether symbolically or in terms of mobilisation towards the homeland). In this sense, the discursive underpinnings of the emergent sectarianised diasporic Shi'a subject can be seen to (at least partially) originate from the domestic social and political context of Iraq itself, as well as in the very experience of exile and displacement productive of the Iraqi Shi'a diaspora in the first place.

Although the historical context of the Ba'th regime and the sectarian violence of post-2003 Iraq thus emerge as significant constitutive elements of the sectarianised diasporic (Iraqi-)Shi'a subject, the discursive production of this subject as a fundamentally ethno-religious alignment not predicated on a specific national or cultural origin would equally not have been possible without the reliance on pre-existing understandings of Shi'a theology and political mythology. Unlike most other minority religious identities, Shi'ism has arguably been built upon a discursive foundation of victimhood and marginalisation (Dabashi, 2011) that has been cultivated and maintained through the transnational influence of the clerical establishment and the tradition of the *marja' al-taqlid* with its emphasis on idealised piety and religious observance. Moreover, the politicisation of Shi'a religious mythology and practice throughout the latter half of the twentieth century

(most notably as a result of the Iranian Islamic revolution, although reinterpretations of Shi'a traditions along political lines predated the rise to power of Ayatollah Khomeini), provided a rich politico-religious architecture onto which contemporary articulations of the Shi'a subject could be mapped.

In this way, politicised articulations of Shi'a ethno-religious identity predated the emergence of the sectarianised Shi'a subject within the contemporary diasporic context, and provided a pre-existing discursive template onto which contemporary grievances and political claims could be transposed. In particular, the affective and emotive resonance of the Karbala paradigm can be seen as underscoring the current emergence of the Shi'a subject within the diasporic imaginary – especially in relation to the militant Sunni Islamist group ISIS – within a sectarian narrative logic that constructs Shi'is as eternal victims and (radical) Sunnis as eternal oppressors. This discursive othering of certain interpretations of Sunni Islam presented as "radical" or "extremist" also feeds into contemporary Western discourses regarding the problematisation and securitisation of Islam (and especially Muslim minorities in Britain, Europe, and the US) that works to frame Shi'is as qualitatively different from their Sunni counterparts.

The narrative production of Shi'a victimhood – beginning with the Battle of Karbala and extending through the marginalisation of Shi'is under Saddam Hussain all the way to the current persecution of Shi'a minorities across the Islamic world by militant Sunni groups such as ISIS – thus works to discursively produce a seemingly coherent notion of Shi'a ethno-religious identity. This "Shi'a identity", on the one hand, draws together various historical, theological, mythological, and political strands within Shi'ism itself and, on the other, mirrors contemporary Western discourses regarding (certain forms of) Sunni Islam. While the former of these elements can be seen as a product of multiple and divergent political and discursive forces over time, the latter fusing of Western

discourses of Islamophobia and sectarianised iterations of the Sunni Other, I maintain, has emerged as a direct result of the diasporic encounter between Shi'ism as a historically-produced politico-religious discursive identity construction and the political and social realities of the contemporary British domestic context productive of the diasporic imaginary.[179] In particular, the British government's implementation of multiculturalism policies founded on a logic of ethnonormativity, along with the securitisation of Islam through programmes such as Prevent, have facilitated the construction of a Shi'a ethno-religious identity formation defined in opposition to the (perceived) negative public conceptions of (Sunni) Islam. In other words, the sectarianisation of the Shi'a ethno-religious subject is a discursive product of the diasporic experience itself, and central to the production of Shi'a identity within the contemporary diasporic imaginary.

As well as providing the discursive underpinnings for the cultivation of a Shi'a-specific ethno-religious identity construction, the material reality of the diaspora has also arguably formed a crucial role in shaping this subject as a transnational and trans-ethic articulation of Shi'a belonging. In particular, the encounter between Shi'is from divergent national and cultural backgrounds within the shared space of multicultural London has been significant in distilling a collective sense of "British Shi'a" identity. This is especially true in the second- and third-generation of British born diasporans who increasingly harbour little emotive or affective attachment to the "homeland" of their parents' and grandparents' generations and instead see their Shi'a ethno-religious identity to be compatible with, and not contrary to, their understandings of what it means to be British.

[179] This thesis has focused primarily on the British domestic context as productive of the diasporic Shi'a subject. However, it would be interesting to investigate the extent to which the particular construction of this subject as explored here is translatable across different Western contexts. For example, might it be possible to speak of a European Shi'a diasporic subject, or a North American Shi'a subject? Although space limitations prevent me from undertaking such an investigation here, this might be a productive avenue for further research.

Moreover, the physical carving-up of different neighbourhoods within the urban fabric of London into "ethnic enclaves" (cf. Metcalf, 1996) has plausibly led to the sectarianisation of space whereby individuals hailing from different branches of Islam inhabit different loci within the city despite often living in close proximity to each other. In this sense, the domestic context of Britain – and London in particular – represent divergent aspects of the discursive production of the diasporic and sectarianised Shi'a subject as lived and experienced within the contemporary moment.

In this way, chapters 1-3 traced the production of the diasporic Shi'a subject across time and contexts, and as the result of multiple and divergent discursive, political, social, material, and theological forces. Deepening the investigation, the final two chapters of the thesis explored the ways in which this subject has been inscribed into the various hegemonic political projects of the contemporary world firstly through the internalisation of modern liberal discourses of humanitarianism, minority representation, and human rights, and secondly via the commodification of Shi'a identity via entry to the global market. It is these final processes that point towards the emergence of the diasporic Shi'a subject as an *ideological construction* and, crucially, undergird this subject's unconscious (re)production of sectarianism through the cultivation of particular identity attachments via the workings of ideological fantasy and ethical subject formation. This is the second thematic thread I wish to draw out as a way of concluding my discussion of the discursive production of the sectarianised diasporic Shi'a subject engaged throughout the thesis; and in particular the theoretical and analytical implications of such an approach when it comes to the conceptualisation and study of sectarianism as a political phenomenon.

Ideology and Unconscious: Sectarianising the Shi'a Subject

In the Introduction, I argued that the discursive production of the diasporic Shi'a subject is fundamentally an *ideological construction*, one that is simultaneously invested in channelling individuals' desire for collective belonging at the same time as it is reflective of the wider ideological forces of hegemonic neoliberalism and consumer capitalism. While the ideological functioning of the Shi'a subject has not always been explicitly stated at every juncture, it nevertheless represents an implicit and significant structuring theme running throughout the thesis that works to explain the ways in which individuals become attached to, internalise, and articulate the contours of this subject. In particular, the foregrounding of the role of ideological fantasy in producing and sustaining specific manifestations of the Shi'a subject within the diasporic imaginary has allowed me to articulate an alternative theorisation of sectarianism that eschews the essentialism of primordialist accounts and the anti-human reductionism of poststructural theory in order to conceptualise sectarianism as *the unconscious by-product of identity formation*.

Moreover, it is as a result of the ideological contours underpinning the various manifestations of the diasporic Shi'a subject that transforms our understanding of this subject from a mere discursive formation to a thoroughly *political* phenomenon, invested and complicit in the hegemonic power structures of the contemporary world. While notions of ethno-religious "Shi'aness" have arguably existed at least since the Battle of Karbala in the ninth century, it is only within the contemporary moment – and as a result of the diasporic encounter between pre-existing politicised understandings of Shi'ism and Western liberal hegemonic norms such as "equality", "justice", and "minority rights" – that the *Shi'a subject*, articulated as an ethical imperative to "*be (a) good (Shi'a)*" has been able to emerge as a contingent and ideological attempt to construct a cohesive "Shi'a identity" in a fluid and mobile world.

The streamlining and policing of "Shi'a identity" inherent in ideological constructions of the Shi'a subject thus form part of a wider global movement towards the increasing specificity of ethnic, religious, cultural, and racial identity categories that are themselves ideological products of the current global political order predicated on consumer capitalism and the segmentation of the market (Alcoff et al., 2006; Reich et al., 1973; Wedel and Kamakura, 2012). Consumer capitalism works, at least in part, to channel the desires of individuals towards the acquisition of particular consumable commodities at the same time as it reifies and fetishises specific forms of ethnic, religious, and cultural identities as a result of their representation through such commodities. The logic of supply and demand that underlies the global market can only continue to operate if "suppliers deliberately fragment demand curves into smaller segments through contrived product differentiation" (Dickson and Ginter, 1987: 2). In this way, both consumers and products become increasingly differentiated in ways that (re)produce particular kinds of identity iterations predicated on the consumption of specific goods and services (for example, wearing a "My Heart Beats Hussain" hoodie to identify oneself as recognisably "Shi'a").

Moreover, the trend towards the increasing diversification of both social identities and the consumable products that represent them forms part of the ideological political logic of the postmodern age. As Žižek makes clear:

> The postmodern identity politics of particular (ethnic, sexual, etc.) lifestyles perfectly fits with the depoliticised notion of society, in which every particular group is "accounted for", has its specific status (of victim) acknowledged through affirmative action or other measures destined to guarantee social justice… This is politics proper: the moment in which a particular demand is not simply part of the

> negotiation of interests but starts to function as the metaphoric condensation of the global restructuring of the entire social space. (Žižek, 2000: 208)

In this sense, discursive formations of Shi'a-specific demands at recognition and minority rights (such as "Shi'a Rights", "anti-Shi'ism", "Shi'aphobia" and "Shi'a pride") do not merely represent attempts to articulate the Shi'a subject itself, they are part of a wider move from the particular to the universal that is ideologically grounded in the liberal humanitarian discourses of consumer capitalism (Alonso, 1994; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009; Laclau, 1994; Laclau and Mouffe, 2001; Žižek, 2000, 2005). This inscription of the Shi'a subject into contemporary ideologies of secularism, humanitarianism, minority representation, human rights, and capitalism thus not only binds individuals to specific iterations of what it means to be "Shi'a" through the workings of ideological fantasy and the manipulation of the desire to "belong", it also works to paper over the discursive instability at the heart of the Shi'a subject and is productive of unconscious attachments to sectarianism through the foregrounding of Shi'a specificity, exceptionalism, and victimhood.

Sectarianism, under this reading, thus emerges as an unconscious by-product of Shi'a specific identity formation as structured by the ideological workings of liberal hegemony and consumer capitalism within the contemporary context. It is worth reiterating at this juncture that my employment of the term "sectarianism" throughout this thesis is fundamentally *descriptive*, and not normative, and relates to the fact that the production of any minority ethno-religious identity is *necessarily sectarian* since it involves the discursive construction of an in-group and an out-group predicated on the denigration of the Other. Here, therefore, Shi'a sectarianism is not understood as stemming from any kind of eternal antagonism with Sunni Islam, or even as primarily resulting from contemporary socio-political grievances that are productive of a sectarianised social

reality or manipulated by sectarian entrepreneurs for personal gain. Rather, sectarianism arises unconsciously and inescapably (as a result of its complicity in ideological fantasy) from attempts to articulate a Shi'a-specific identity construction as one particular form of minority belonging within the context of the global "flowering of difference" (Bartholomeusz and De Silva, 1998: 157).

Arguably, it is only as a result of the diasporic experience, whereby Shi'a minorities from diverse national and cultural backgrounds have come together under the communal category of "Shi'aness" constructed as a minority ethno-religious identity within the Western context (recall the formulation of Shi'is being "a minority within a minority") that specific (sectarianised) articulations of the transnational and trans-ethnic diasporic Shi'a subject have gained social and political significance. In this way, the (unconscious) sectarianisation of the diasporic Shi'a subject is primarily a *modern* phenomenon, reflective of contemporary power structures and ideological formations.

However, it would be reductive to assume that because contemporary manifestations of the (sectarianised) diasporic Shi'a subject are embedded in wider discursive and ideological power structures that this subject represents either a cohesive system of identity production for individuals seeking to express a collective notion of "Shi'aness", or indeed a linear or one-directional process of identity formation in which individuals are required to identify with the sectarianised Shi'a subject in order to articulate their sense of "Shi'a identity". Rather, it is important to acknowledge the dialectical, dynamic, (re)iterative and potentially transformative processes of identity formation as differentially produced through discourse and practice. On a theoretical level, the foregrounding of a Lacanian-inspired approach to identity throughout the thesis opens up space for the exercise of individual agency when it comes to the potential emergence of alternative iterations of the Shi'a subject across time and contexts.

Beyond Identity Formation: Challenging the Shi'a Subject

Since the primary focus of this thesis has been on tracing the development of one particular articulation of the diasporic Shi'a subject within the contemporary discursive imaginary, and the implications this subject has regarding manifestations of Shi'a sectarianism, I have necessarily prioritised the kinds of discursive formations and subjective expressions that point to the production of this subject as a Shi'a-specific identity category. While this focus is reflective of the overarching trends that emerged from the empirical data garnered in the field, no single study can claim to represent a holistic picture of the social world – indeed, the process of research itself is by its very nature partial, fragmentary, subjective, iterative, and fundamentally contingent (Andrews et al., 9781; Bott, 2010; Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002; Kapiszewski et al., 2015; Lincoln and Denzin, 2003; Savage, 2013; Soss, 2006). For this reason, I feel it necessary to highlight the fact that the study presented here represents only *one* particular manifestation of the diasporic Shi'a subject, and that there may well be multiple alternative or contradictory articulations that are currently emerging within the diasporic imaginary.

Due to the inherent lack at the heart of every identity construction – including that of the Shi'a subject – any attempt by the individual to identify with the discursive subject is necessarily incomplete, and precipitates an eternal process of identification and re-identification in an attempt to paper over the lack at the heart of the subject (Glynos, 2001; Howarth et al., 2000; Lacan, 2002; Laclau and Mouffe, 2001; Stavrakakis, 2002). This active practice of (re)identification not only foregrounds the role of individual agency in producing discursive identity constructions, it also harbours a transformative potential through the (re)iterative nature of such a process. Indeed, within the Derridean notion of iterability, "there can be no repetition without alteration, and *vice versa*"

(Thomassen, 2010: 47). In other words, the instability at the heart of the Shi'a subject precipitates an ongoing and constant need for individuals to (re)articulate and (re)identify with this subject, but the iterability of these very acts of identification can also result in subtly different articulations of the subject – thus resulting in a proliferation of multiple "Shi'a subjects" across time and space.

Indeed, for many of my research participants, their attachment to the sectarianised diasporic Shi'a subject whose contours I have traced throughout this thesis changed and shifted over time and in relation to the socio-political environment in which they found themselves. Just as this subject itself has developed through engagement with the Ba'thist regime in Iraq, the experience of migration and exile, the transnational influence of the clerical establishment, the politicisation of Shi'a religious mythology, and contemporary global ideologies of liberal humanitarianism and consumer capitalism, so too have individuals' understandings and articulations of this subject changed across contexts and in relation to the ideological and discursive power structures in which it is being articulated. What it meant to be "Shi'a" in Iraq during the 1980s, or in London during the 1990s, or indeed in the Middle East today, is qualitatively different from what it means to be "Shi'a" as a minority ethno-religious identity formation within the contemporary diasporic imaginary. It is for this reason that the sectarianised diasporic Shi'a subject explored here should be understood as a thoroughly *modern* subject, since it is both a product, and a (partial) reflection of the contemporary world.

Neither has this thesis sought to address the ways in which non-practicing or secular Shi'is might differentially identify (or, significantly, *dis*-identify) with the sectarianised Shi'a subject under investigation here. As one of my (non-religious) research participants noted ruefully in relation to his family's increasing investment in particular ways of being and doing "Shi'aness" that he saw as antagonistic to alternative Muslim

identities: "This isn't the way I was brought up. We used to have lots of Sunni friends and neighbours. Now, my family are becoming more and more sectarian."[180] While this particular example involves an individual who explicitly refuses to identify with *any* kind of iteration of the Shi'a subject, it is my contention that every process of identification (and re-identification) necessarily harbours the potential for similar kinds of refusal or disavowal (albeit to various different extents). As Muñoz highlights:

> Identification is not about simple mimesis… Identifying with an object, person, lifestyle, history, political ideology, religious orientation, and so on, means also simultaneously and partially counteridentifying, as well as only partially identifying, with different aspects of the social and psychic world. (Muñoz, 1999: 8)

It is for this reason that it is important to maintain a conceptual and analytical distance between individual practicing Shi'is (and the kinds of identifications and dis-identifications they perform within different contexts and at different moments in time), and the discursively constructed, ideologically-invested *Shi'a subject* with which these individuals can choose to identify and which produces sectarianism as its unconscious by-product. Although articulations of the latter are only available through the performative practices of the former, neither should be seen as reducible to the other but rather as being engaged in a mutually reinforcing participatory identity politics reflective of the specific moment in time in which the Shi'a subject is articulated.

This thesis thus represents an in-depth study of one particular iteration of the diasporic Shi'a subject (and of the unconscious forms of sectarianism it produces) at the particular historical and socio-political moment of writing. A similar study conducted at a different

[180] Informal conversation with Abu M, February 2015.

point in time might well reveal very different ways of being and performing "Shi'aness" which would, themselves, be reflective of the particular discursive, political, and ideological forces at work within that specific historical moment.

Possible Further Directions

The five substantive chapters of this thesis have focused on five different aspects of subject formation productive of the sectarianised diasporic Shi'a subject: the symbolic significance of "Iraq" across time and contexts and the shift away from nationalistic towards ethno-sectarian forms of belonging (Chapter 1); the theological, mythological, and political underpinnings of what it means to be "Shi'a" in the contemporary world (Chapter 2); the material reality of diaspora and the significance of the British domestic political and social context (Chapter 3); the influence of global liberal humanitarian norms in shaping the contours of the Shi'a subject through the discourse of "Shi'a Rights" (Chapter 4); and the commodification of the Shi'a subject through its inscription within the global market for identities (Chapter 5). However, this is not to claim that these five aspects represent the only forms of subject formation productive of the sectarianised Shi'a subject within the contemporary diasporic imaginary; rather, they represent five significant themes that emerged out of the empirical data garnered in the field and which together are able to account for various historical, political, theological, affective, and ideological forces in which this subject is invested.

Nevertheless, there remain a number of other themes and trends that also emerged throughout the research process and that represent potential avenues of further research. In particular, the issues of gender, minority Muslim identities in the West, and diasporic mobilisation all represent interesting (if less fundamental) aspects in the contemporary production, articulation, and performances of the diasporic Shi'a subject. For example, while gender was not something that emerged particularly strongly during

my fieldwork (or rather, was often superceded by other elements), it nevertheless represents a potential factor regarding the ways in which individuals cultivate, sustain, and engage with their understanding of what it means to be "Shi'a" in the contemporary diasporic imaginary. This is especially the case when it comes to the apparent paradox between the cultivation of female piety and submission through the promotion of religious practices such as *hijab* and gender segregation and the increasing visibility and significance of Shi'a women in public spaces. This is especially true of younger, British-born Shi'a women. Conversely, while gender does indeed represent a significant aspect of identity formation (Butler, 2011a, 2011b; Deeb, 2011), it emerged less strongly in my fieldwork than I originally anticipated, and indeed many of my research participants seemed less invested in their understandings of themselves as "Shi'a men" or "Shi'a women" as in their attempts to articulate and represent a coherent sense of "Shi'a identity" or "British Shi'ism" regardless of the specific gender dynamics within these identity constructions.[181]

While this thesis has focused primarily on the cultivation, and production of the sectarianised Shi'a subject within the context of diasporic Britain, there are possible questions that could be raised regarding the potential transference of this subject across time and space. In particular, the increasing emphasis on a transnational, trans-ethnic, and mobile category of "Shi'a identity" I have documented here has potential implications for the cultivation of a *global* Shi'a subject. However, while the possibility of a "global Shi'a subject" may represent an interesting future iteration of Shi'a ethno-religious identity, at the time of writing there remain significant differences in the ways in which Shi'ism is lived and experienced in different parts of the world. As van den Bos notes, it is currently not possible to speak of "a European Shi'ism defined by significantly

[181] Of course, this is not to claim that gender doesn't hold any implications for the production and iteration of the diasporic Shi'a subject, but rather that it did not emerge as one of the primary factors I was able to identify from the empirical data garnered in this particular study.

transnational or transethnic organisation", and it is rather "trans-European ties" that matter most when it comes to Shi'a activism within the European context (van den Bos, 2012: 12). Moreover, Shi'a communities in the US are qualitatively different from those in the UK or Europe more broadly (Grewal, 2013; Sachedina, 1994; Scharbrodt and Shanneik, 2018), as well as facing very different political and social circumstances to Shi'a minorities (and majorities) within the Muslim world.

It is for these reasons that I have prioritised one particular iteration of the diasporic Shi'a imaginary throughout this thesis – as understood through the prism of the British domestic context. Nevertheless, this prioritisation should be seen as a methodological and empirical, rather than analytical choice, and does not therefore preclude the potential for the cultivation of trans-ethnic and transnational ties that might speak to the future emergence of a global Shi'a subject.

Moreover, against the background of rising sectarian violence in the Middle East and wider Islamic world – in particular the targeting of Shi'a religious communities in countries such as Pakistan, Indonesia, Iraq, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Senegal Syria, and Yemen – as well as the trend of Western-born Muslims travelling to fight in civil conflicts in Iraq and Syria, in future it might also be worth inquiring the extent to which contemporary articulations of the Shi'a subject are implicated in diasporic mobilisation along sectarian lines. Although it is difficult to establish the extent to which the diaspora has become materially and psychically invested in the sectarianisation of Iraqi and Middle East politics more broadly, it is plausible to argue that the sectarianisation of the Shi'a subject in the diasporic imaginary has impacted the kinds of activism Shi'is are likely to pursue. Indeed, this is something that has been explored elsewhere, especially among first-generation diasporans (Al-Ali, 2007; Al-Khalidi et al., 2007; Al-Khalifa Sharif,

2003; Al-Rasheed, 1994; Alkhairo, 2011; Kadhum, 2016; Reidar, 2007), and as such has not been the primary focus of this thesis.

Concluding Remarks

Overall, the thesis has drawn on the case study of the Iraqi Shi'a diaspora in London in order to trace the emergence of a *sectarianised Shi'a diasporic subject* predicated on an underlying Shi'a discursive ethics, as well as by universalistic discourses of "equality" and "human rights" and hegemonies of global capital that have resulted in the reification of particularistic and pseudo-ethnic categories of "Shi'aness". The production of this subject can thus be seen as an ideological formation, one that inscribes and reproduces pre-existing notions of neoliberal capitalism and commodified belonging, undergirded by an ethical imperative towards universal humanitarianism. Moreover, it is my contention that the recent rise of ISIS in the Middle East represents the Other to the signifier of "good Shi'a Muslim" that this discourse attempts to construct, and thus serves as the suturing point between Western media tropes of "evil Muslims/terrorists" and Shi'a historical and political orientations towards sectarianised identifications predicated on the negation of (certain forms of) Sunni Islam. In this sense, the merging of a Shi'a moral economy with a Western universal humanitarianism (the encounter between which takes place in the diasporic space) is undergirded by an ethical imperative to "be (a) good (Shi'a)" which nevertheless sustains a particularistic Shi'a subject that simultaneously harbours sectarian attachments as the unconscious by-product of Shi'a ethno-religious identity formation.

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